

How Effective was Field Marshal William Slim as an Operational Artist?

**A Monograph
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Abstract

How effective was Field Marshal William Slim as an Operational Artist? MAJ JCM Greaves
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Field Marshal William 'Bill' Slim ended World War II in command of Fourteenth Army. His understanding of what motivated men in the most trying of times is well publicized. Indeed, he is most well-known for his thoughts on morale and leadership. This monograph seeks another aspect of Slim, his ability to command at the highest of formations. Focusing on his time in Burma, this paper covers from 1942-1945 and his time as a Corps and Army commander.

Slim arrived in Burma in 1942 and assumed command of a corps at the worst possible moment. His two weak divisions were hammered by the Japanese Imperial Army and demoralized by poor leadership, a lack of equipment, and a fear of the jungle. Slim returned the battered remnants of I Burma Corps to India. Assuming command of XV Corps in India, Slim trained and prepared a force capable of defeating the Japanese. Using the tactic of an 'Administrative Box', a defended locality resupplied by air, it was designed to defeat the Japanese tactics of envelopment. In 1944 Slim, as commander Fourteenth Army, deployed XV Corps and successfully defeated the Japanese for the first time in Burma. It was the tipping point. Following this success, others followed.

This paper sets out the historical aspects of the three main campaigns managed by Slim. First it examines Slim's input and performance in the First and Second Arakan Campaigns. Second, his decisions at the defense of Kohima and Imphal and the subsequent break out of the Indian Army from those locations. Finally, it assesses the pinnacle of his generalship during Operations Capital and Extended Capital.

Slim's performance warrants careful consideration. He commanded a diverse multinational army over extremely challenging terrain against a fanatically determined enemy. His decisions offer future operational artists guidance and prescient advice. His efforts are often overlooked because of the focus on the European theater. This monograph offers that Slim should come out from the shadows and be rightly held up as an exemplary proponent of operational art.

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Field Marshal Viscount W J Slim, KG, GCB, GCMG, GCVO, GBE, DSO, MC, KStJ

Source: Burma Star Association, "Lt.Gen. Slim at Fort Dufferin, Mandalay, in March 1945,"
Photo from <http://www.burmastar.org.uk/slim.htm>

Introduction

They (the soldiers of Fourteenth Army) fought on a front of seven hundred miles, in four groups, separated by great distances, with no lateral communications between them and beyond tactical support of one another...Commanders at all levels had to act more on their own; they were given great latitude to work out their own plans to achieve what they knew was the Army Commander's intention. In time they developed to a marked degree a flexibility of mind and a firmness of decision that enabled them to act swiftly to take advantage of sudden information or changing circumstances without reference to their superiors...This acting without orders, in anticipation of orders, or without waiting for approval, yet always within the overall intention, must become second nature in any form of warfare... It requires in the higher command a corresponding flexibility of mind, confidence in its subordinates, and the power to make its intentions clear right through the force.¹

British Field Marshal Viscount William 'Bill' Slim led a coalition of forces in Burma during World War II. His background is all-important when viewed through the lens of the social context of the officer corps of the British Army in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Born 1891 in Birmingham, England, Slim was commissioned into 9th Battalion, The Royal Warwickshire Regiment of the British Army at the outbreak of World War I.² His relatively humble beginnings gave him a sense of humility that set him apart from many British Army officers who traditionally came from an aristocratic background. Slim was badly wounded while commanding a platoon of the 9th Warwickshire Regiment at Gallipoli in the failed Dardanelles Campaign. Prior to his injury, Slim, still with the Warwickshire Regiment, observed an attack conducted by the Gurkhas. This latterly became a significant event in his military career. After recovering from his wounds, he was posted to Mesopotamia, modern day Iraq, where he received the Military Cross for bravery during the advance to Baghdad, then under British control.³

The Indian Army, a separate organization to the British Army, formed the mainstay of the

¹ Field Marshal Viscount William Slim, *Defeat Into Victory, Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942 – 1945* (UK: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 541-542.

² Michael Calvert, "Slim, Ballantine's Illustrated History of the Violent Century," *War Leader, Book No.12* (New York: Ballantine Books, Inc.,1973), 6.

³ Viscount John Slim, interview by author, London, England, August 21, 2011. General Joseph W. (Vinegar Joe) Stilwell during his as commander of American forces in the China-Burma-India Theater. Stilwell, an ardent Anglophobe, disliked the sometimes high-handed mannerisms of old-school British officers.

defense of the Indian subcontinent and fulfilled other duties throughout the British Empire. Indeed, elements of the Indian Army fought with distinction in the First World War.⁴ After the war, sensing few opportunities in the British Army, Slim transferred his commission to the Indian Army, joining the 1st Battalion, 6th Gurkha Rifles (1/6 Gurkha Rifles), a regiment with which he would have a lifelong affinity. Indeed, when Slim was in command of Fourteenth Army in Burma, his son, John Slim, joined 1/6 Gurkha Rifles and fought alongside his father at Meiktila in 1945.⁵ During the Interwar period, Slim's rise through the ranks was by no means meteoric. He progressed steadily to command the 2nd Battalion 7th Gurkha Rifles (2/7 Gurkha Rifles). In 1925 he was a student at the Indian Staff College, Quetta; here the Indian Army noted his capacity for staff work. Slim excelled and emerged as the best student in his class, a performance that secured him the opportunity to teach at the British Army Staff College, an unusual accolade for an Indian Army officer.⁶

At the outbreak of the Second World War, Slim gained command of 10 Indian Infantry Brigade deployed in the Sudan fighting the Italians in September 1939. Slim did not enjoy a great deal of success as a brigade commander; indeed during the first brigade attack one of his battalions broke under artillery bombardment and withdrew in disarray. His short-lived assignment came to an end quickly when he was wounded and evacuated after being injured

⁴ Daniel P Marston, *Phoenix from the Ashes: The Indian Army in the Burma Campaign* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2003). Throughout this paper, the term Indian Army refers to the British Indian Army consisting of both British and Indian soldiers.

⁵ Viscount John Slim, interview by author, London, England, August 21, 2011. William Slim's son, John, was a platoon commander when he and his father shared a trench together in Meiktila. Slim came forward to visit the unit and was caught in an untimely, but vicious firefight.

⁶ Michael Calvert, "Slim, Ballantine's Illustrated History of the Violent Century," *War Leader, Book No.12* (New York: Ballantine Books, Inc.,1973), 10. Indian Army officers were viewed by British Army officers in a lesser light. Slim's intellect and complete integrity offered him as a perfect candidate from the Indian Army. Additionally, possessing an inquisitive and questioning outlook, showed himself in stark contrast to many officers who merely viewed soldiering as a means to a comfortable end within the context of the British Army during the Interwar years. Indeed, Calvert offers only those officers with independent financial means offered personal points of view without fear of vilification, or removal by the chain of command.

during an Italian air raid.⁷ His performance notwithstanding, Slim had done enough to warrant promotion to major general in 1941. After a brief spell as chief of staff to General Sir Claude Auchinleck, Commander in Chief of the Indian Army, Slim found himself commanding 10 Indian Infantry Division in Mesopotamia.⁸ Although he did not excel as a Divisional commander, he did have a series of small successes fighting Arabs backed by the German Army that threatened to disrupt essential Allied oil supplies. Slim showed competence in the role although Auchinleck did not believe he had the capacity for the rank of lieutenant general. Nevertheless, Slim personally enjoyed divisional command so much that he discusses this time in the opening of *Defeat into Victory*: “It was good fun commanding a division in the Iraq desert. It is good fun commanding a division anywhere. It is one of the four best commands in the Service.”⁹

Against his will, Slim departed his beloved 10 Indian Division in March 1942, and armed with scant information was assigned to India to command the newly formed First Burma Corps, known as Burcorps, made up of two very weak Anglo-Indian infantry divisions. Promoted to acting lieutenant general, his assumption of command could not have come at a more strategically difficult moment. Facing the onslaught of a highly successful Imperial Japanese Army in Burma, Slim encountered a grim situation on the ground. Soon after his arrival, the Japanese Army drove the remnants of the Indian and British Army out of Burma, forcing Slim, in command of Burcorps, to conduct a humiliating withdrawal back to the eastern Indian border, thus surrendering control of Burma to the Japanese. Slim demonstrated his skill and determination as he withdrew his forces through Burma in an orderly fashion, whilst hard pressed by the Japanese.

⁷ Eric Morris, “The Uncommon Commoner,” *MHQ: The Quarterly Journal of Military History* 7 (Spring 1995): 20.

⁸ Michael Calvert, “Slim, Ballantine’s Illustrated History of the Violent Century,” *War Leader, Book No.12* (New York: Ballantine Books, Inc.,1973), 16-20.

⁹ Field Marshal Viscount William Slim, *Defeat Into Victory, Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942 – 1945* (UK: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 3.

Michael Calvert, who served with Major General Orde Wingate and his Chindits in Burma, believed “Slim never really had a chance. He took over two ramshackle divisions both of which had suffered defeat in battle. He had no further reinforcements. [It] has the doubtful distinction of being the longest retreat of any unit in the British army.”¹⁰ Upon consolidating his corps in India, Slim had to rebuild his force to defend his base, and to regain the initiative from an aggressive enemy.¹¹

Burma is home to some of the world’s most inhospitable terrain and jungles. Located in Southeast Asia between India and Thailand, it covers approximately 240,000 square miles, a size roughly equitable with the countries of France and Belgium. A number of rivers intersect Burma, and three are worthy of note within the strategic and operational context of World War II. They are the Chindwin, the Sittang, and the Irrawaddy. Individually they form formidable obstacles, collectively a barrier to military and civilian movement. Slim dealt with them during both the retreat in 1942 and reacquisition of Burma from the Japanese in 1944-1945. As well as the rivers, other significant terrain features intersect the country. Although not mountainous in the true sense, dense jungle covers the bulk of the land mass, and contours rise to significant high points.¹² Slim offers his thoughts on his first sight of the terrain to which he, and his soldiers, must become accustomed. “Flying over them, the jungle-clad hills of Burma, you cannot really appreciate what an obstacle they are to movement. To do that you must hack and push your way through the clinging, tight-packed greenery, scramble up the precipitous slopes and slide down the other side,

¹⁰ Michael Calvert, “Slim, Ballantine’s Illustrated History of the Violent Century,” *War Leader, Book No.12* (New York: Ballantine Books, Inc.,1973), 44-45.

¹¹ Eric Morris, “The Uncommon Commoner,” *MHQ: The Quarterly Journal of Military History* 7 (Spring 1995): 20-21.

¹² Michael Calvert, “Slim, Ballantine’s Illustrated History of the Violent Century,” *War Leader, Book No.12* (New York: Ballantine Books, Inc.,1973), 25-28.

endlessly, as if you were walking along the teeth of a saw.”¹³ Thus, any off road movement is difficult and slow, especially if using motorised transport. During the war, the region’s communication networks of road and rail were limited. Traditionally, the old rail links were limited as they were designed to support British colonial tea and rubber plantations, and the roads were generally limited to inter-village transit.¹⁴

Slim, throughout the remainder of the war became progressively more successful and drove the Japanese out of Burma through a series of well-executed campaigns. In modern doctrine, campaigns are the responsibility of the operational commander. The British and British Indian Armies did not use the concept of doctrine as officers understand it in today’s lexicon. He knew the requirement of standard operating procedures, and as an intelligent, analytical, and pragmatic commander, he understood the conceptual necessity for both a form of doctrine and methodological processes inherent in the planning and execution of operations.¹⁵ Currently, according to United States Army doctrine, any commander that “links employing tactical forces to achieving the strategic endstate,” is a practitioner of operational art. Applying this definition to Slim’s day leads one to ask, how effective was Field Marshal Slim as an operational artist? ¹⁶

In his book, *Defeat into Victory*, Slim does not offer readers an enduring theory of war; rather he provides a memoir that demonstrates he was a practitioner one of the most difficult of arts to master. He showed a formidable understanding of how to maneuver large numbers of soldiers in the most demanding of environments and a masterful and committed understanding of

¹³ Field Marshal Viscount William Slim, *Defeat Into Victory, Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942 – 1945* (UK: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 9.

¹⁴ Ibid., 170-175.

¹⁵ Ibid., 182-196.

¹⁶ U.S. Department of Defense, *Field Manual (FM) 3-0 Operations*, (Washington , D.C.: Government Printing Office, February 2008, Change No. 1), Ch. 7. The specific elements of operational art are; end state and conditions, centers of gravity, direct or in direct approach, decisive points, lines of operation/effort, operational reach, tempo, simultaneity and depth, phasing and transitions, culmination, and risk.

his chosen profession. He successfully conducted a series of major operations and campaigns to secure overall victory. In essence, his multiple commands spanned a trying geographical environment, a complex command and control structure, an often difficult and fraught multinational alliance, a dangerous, committed, and stubborn enemy, and, in India, a nation that had begun to seek, in part through violent means, independent statehood from Great Britain. This paper demonstrates his effectiveness as an operational artist by depicting his shrewd and keen understanding of the elements of mission command. Slim understood the operational problems he faced. He visualized how to link his strategic requirements with his tactical means, and described to his subordinate commanders and staffs how to best apply an operational approach. Through careful direction of the battles and his particular style of leadership, he created an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect. This allowed Slim to constantly assess the battlefield and re-frame the direction of his forces as the situation demanded. Simultaneously, Slim applied the classic principles of operational art, as enshrined in modern United States Army doctrine.¹⁷

The First and Second Arakan Campaigns

The two Arakan Campaigns, conducted separately throughout the period 1942-1944, saw some of the most difficult fighting during the entire war in Burma. Facing a complex operational environment, Slim assessed the Japanese tactical methodology and directed a response by reshaping and training a demoralized force.¹⁸

During the period of reorganization immediately after the retreat, Slim assumed

¹⁷ Shimon Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence: The Evolution of Operational Theory* (UK: Frank Cass Publishers, 1997 & 2006), 183. Naveh describes operational art as “a new and independent field of knowledge, intended to accomplish strategic goals by means of a systemic conduct of warfare.” U.S. Department of Defense, *Field Manual (FM) 3-0 Operations*, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, February 2008, Change No. 1), Ch. 7. See this reference for U.S. doctrinal statement on operational art. Department of the Army, *Army Doctrine Publication 3-0: Unified Land Operations*. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2011), 13.

¹⁸ Department of the Army, *Army Doctrine Publication 3-0: Unified Land Operations*. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2011), 13.

command of XV Corps in eastern India, then consisting of 14 Division, under Major General Wilfred Lloyd, and 26 Indian Division under Major General Clive Lomax. Slim's primary concern at this time was a possible nationalist Indian insurrection in XV Corps' base of operations. This threat notwithstanding, Lieutenant General Noel Irwin, Commander-in-Chief, Eastern Army, Slim's immediate superior was under substantial pressure from Prime Minister Winston Churchill and General Sir Archibald Wavell, Commander Far Eastern Forces, to regain the initiative in Burma. Ordered by Irwin, Slim launched Lloyd's 14 Indian Division, the stronger of the two, to attack into the Arakan peninsula in December 1942. During this, the first Arakan campaign, Slim's Corps headquarters was deliberately bypassed by Irwin. One of the potential reasons for this decision was that Irwin blamed Slim for the loss of Burma, and therefore did not trust him. Instead, he chose to monitor the battle through his headquarters, a significant anomaly in the chain of command.¹⁹ The Arakan region forms the bulk of the western coastal area south of Chittagong, then part of Imperial India, and stretches over four hundred miles to the southernmost tip of Burma. The region comprises of less complex terrain than the remainder of central and northern Burma, although it is still interspersed with rivers, jungles and difficult terrain. The closer to the shore, the more passable the ground becomes. Overlooking the Bay of Bengal, the avenues of approach for attack in 1942 were limited, due to a mountainous spine that runs parallel

¹⁹ Robert Lyman, *Slim, Master of War: Burma and the Birth of Modern Warfare* (UK: Constable & Robinson Ltd, 2004), 72. Wavell was, at the time Commander-in-Chief India. Alexander was Commander, Burma Army. He had replaced Lieutenant General Sir Thomas Hutton, who although an excellent administrator had failed to impress Wavell in his conduct of the forward battle. *Ibid.*, 10, 119. Hutton, similarly to Slim, had the near impossible task of defending Burma with an ill prepared, and insufficiently supplied force. This command structure reinforced failure in the early days of 1941-42; "In August 1943, the British and United States Governments formed a new South-East Asia Allied Command to control all forces in Burma, Ceylon, Malaya, the Dutch East Indies, and Indo-China. The remedy came with the creation of South East Asia Command and the appointments of General Sir George Giffard as 11th Army Group Commander and Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten as the Supreme Allied Commander; General Sir Claude Auchinleck replaced Wavell in August 1942 as the Commander in Chief, India. Although British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, did not care for Auchinleck, he proved to be an excellent choice. Auchinleck supported Giffard and Slim in the field and created a firm base from which to build the future Fourteenth Army.

with the coastline. However, it was deemed to be weakly defended by the Japanese who had suffered nearly 30% casualties during their northerly advance from the capital, Rangoon.

At the beginning of December 1942, Lloyd launched a series of ill-conceived and easily identifiable ground thrusts toward Akyab Island, a small island off the Arakan coast, only some sixty miles from the border with India. The Akyab region, and the surrounding peninsula, contained a port, Maungdaw, and well established ground lines of communication to the interior of India, thus making it an understandable location to attack towards and deny the Japanese access to. Lloyd's attacks failed for a number of reasons. First, the task was too great an undertaking for a divisional commander, and second, Irwin continued to offer Lloyd further reinforcements until he was eventually overwhelmed while trying to command nine brigades. In short, from December 1942 to April 1943 Lloyd conducted a series of attacks on a narrow frontage against thoughtful, well-prepared Japanese defensive positions and failed to achieve any gains. Indeed, 14 Division made all the same mistakes that had been so costly during the retreat. Irwin removed Lloyd in March 1943, and replaced him with commander 26 Indian Division, Lomax, but the damage was already done. In retreat, and being harassed by the Japanese in a similar fashion to the withdrawal in 1942, Irwin removed Lomax and took command of the battle himself, albeit briefly. An over reliance on ground lines of communication had ultimately unhinged the advance and the Japanese capitalized on this by cutting off the forward elements of 14 Division. "The lack of surprise this entailed, coupled with a rigid inflexibility in procedures once battle was joined, enabled the Japanese to read every British move, and thus pre-empt them with ease."²⁰ Slim, ordered by Irwin to review the situation in March, but not to assume command, returned from the Arakan noting; "the force, nine brigades with a very large and difficult line of communication area, was much too big for a divisional headquarters, even if

²⁰ Robert Lyman, *Slim, Master of War: Burma and the Birth of Modern Warfare* (UK: Constable & Robinson Ltd, 2004), 87.

augmented, to command and administer.”²¹ In other words, Slim carefully worded to Irwin that he had misread the situation. In April 1943, Irwin placed Slim in administrative, not tactical command of the greatly enlarged 14 Indian Division, and ordered him to hold ground in the northern portion of the Arakan, a mistake in Slim’s opinion. In order to save 14 Division, Slim withdrew towards India while also attempting to regain the initiative from the Japanese. Slim planned a divisional level ambush. This failed because even when pressed from the front, the Indian Army units felt uneasy about the potential threat to their rearward passage of lines for withdrawal. Had the forces under command in the Arakan been less demoralized, the trap prepared by Slim may well have succeeded.²²

Thus, by May 1943, all 14 Division units, the bulk of XV Corps, returned to India from the Arakan peninsula. In a final analysis of this short lived and unsuccessful campaign, Slim was unable to affect the eventual outcome. Once in India, recriminations flew between the army and corps commanders, with Slim nearly losing his command after being sacked by Irwin who held him responsible for yet another defeat. However, Auchinleck, realizing that it was Irwin, rather than Slim who was to blame, removed Irwin.²³ In August, 1943, General Sir George Giffard, who had made a name for himself reorganizing forces in West Africa, replaced Irwin as Commander in Chief Eastern Forces. Shortly afterwards Eastern Forces Command folded and

²¹ Field Marshal Viscount William Slim, *Defeat Into Victory, Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942 – 1945* (UK: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 153.

²² *Ibid.*, 159-160.

²³ Robert Lyman, *Slim, Master of War: Burma and the Birth of Modern Warfare* (UK: Constable & Robinson Ltd, 2004), 127. Irwin’s removal of Slim and his headquarters from the chain of command and giving direct control to Lloyd from the start was highly unusual. Irwin’s decisions served to underscore the initial command disconnect between Wavell, General Sir Harold Alexander, and Irwin. The reasoning behind Irwin’s decision, Lyman offers, was Irwin’s dislike of Slim based on his assessment that Slim had ‘lost’ Burma. Additionally, Lyman notes that Irwin was, by nature, a meddler. Slim received a terse message from Irwin with an element of dark humor. It simply stated “You’re not sacked. I am.” Michael Calvert, “Slim, Ballantine’s Illustrated History of the Violent Century,” *War Leader, Book No.12* (New York: Ballantine Books, Inc., 1973), 52-53. Viscount John Slim, interview by author, London, England, August 21, 2011. Eric Morris, “The Uncommon Commoner,” *MHQ: The Quarterly Journal of Military History* 7 (Spring 1995): 22-23.

became 11 Army Group. Slim's relationship with Giffard was vastly superior to his one with Irwin, and their understanding of one another's intent eventually allowed Slim, now commander Fourteenth Army from its formation in October 1943, to develop a tightly knit and cohesive force.²⁴

As commander Fourteenth Army, Slim had two corps under command at this late stage of 1943. Slim apportioned the southern area, the Arakan, to XV Corps, now commanded by Lieutenant General Philip Christison, and the central and western areas of Burma, encompassing Kohima and Imphal, to IV Corps, commanded by Lieutenant General Geoffrey Scoones. Slim set the conditions for a working environment of trust and implicit understanding of his intent with all his subordinate commanders, one of the principal concepts on which Slim would rely, and rightly so.²⁵ His command spanned a wide area. India needed defending, and Fourteenth Army required a great deal of training, equipment, and nurturing to be brought to a suitable fighting standard. The Indian Army was poorly versed in jungle combat; moreover, the soldiers were afraid of it. The Japanese tactics of envelopment had unnerved British and Indian soldiers alike, and left them fearful of separation from their logistical supply lines. Almost from the day of his arrival in the China-Burma-India theater, Slim worked hard to ensure that all the men under his command became comfortable with living and operating within the jungle environment. Thus, he demanded, "mental and bodily endurance...they [the Indian Army] were taught to treat the jungle

²⁴ Field Marshal Viscount William Slim, *Defeat Into Victory, Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942 – 1945* (UK: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 209. Slim, on taking command of Fourteenth Army noted the following, "The principles on which I planned all operations were: firstly, the ultimate intention must always be an offensive one, second, the main idea on which the plan was based must be simple, third, that idea must be held in view throughout and everything else must give way to it, and finally, the plan must have an element of surprise."

²⁵ Michael Calvert, "Slim, Ballantine's Illustrated History of the Violent Century," *War Leader, Book No.12* (New York: Ballantine Books, Inc.,1973), 8-34.

as a friend.”²⁶

The Second Arakan Campaign planned and executed by Slim and Christison in 1943-1944, took place in a dramatically different strategic and operational context than that of the first failed campaign. Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten had taken command of South East Asia Command. Mountbatten quickly grasped the intricacies of the difficult and complex problems surrounding the whole China-Burma-India theater. Incisive and patient, Mountbatten provided the intellectual capacity and character needed to tie together the various services and multinational allies, including Stilwell and his Chinese forces of the Northern Central Area Command, to create a more focused Allied effort. In short, Mountbatten allowed Slim far greater freedom of maneuver both militarily and politically.

In late 1943 the Allied Combined Chiefs of Staff assumed at the grand strategic level that the Japanese were overstretched and actively seeking to shrink the burgeoning and costly perimeter. Indeed the Combined Chiefs had correctly identified the Japanese object; they were seeking consolidation on all fronts. Ironically, “it so happened that in western Burma the best answer was to advance.”²⁷ On receiving guidance from Mountbatten, Slim prepared for four separate offenses during 1944, whilst simultaneously considering potential Japanese offensives.

1. The overland advance of XV Corps in Arakan.
2. The advance of Stilwell’s Chinese on Myitkyina.
3. A long-range penetration operation by Wingate’s force to help Stilwell.
4. An advance on the main front in Assam by IV Corps to the Chindwin.

In essence Slim was tasked with beginning a general offensive threatening the Japanese

²⁶ Michael Calvert, “Slim, Ballantine’s Illustrated History of the Violent Century,” *War Leader, Book No.12* (New York: Ballantine Books, Inc.,1973), 19. Daniel P Marston, *Phoenix from the Ashes: The Indian Army in the Burma Campaign*. (Westport : Praeger Publishers, 2003), 81-99. See this reference for further reading on tactical changes made to all forces in Burma. Robert Lyman, *Slim, Master of War: Burma and the Birth of Modern Warfare* (UK: Constable & Robinson Ltd, 2004), 127.

²⁷ Ronald Lewin, *Slim, The Standard Bearer* (GB: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1999), 148.

in northern, western, and southern Burma, whilst simultaneously using the Chinese and the Chindits in a disruptive fashion to threaten the Japanese lines of communication in a series of deep operations.²⁸

Slim carefully planned the second Arakan campaign. As commander Fourteenth Army he provided advice and support to XV Corps commander, Christison.²⁹ The plan itself was similar to the first Arakan campaign; however, Slim intended to avoid a direct frontal and 'lockstep' ground assault. Instead, the plan was to conduct "a series of hop, skip, and jump minor amphibious operations working down the coast in hooks behind the successive Japanese positions."³⁰ Thus deliberately avoiding what Slim himself wrote as tactical lessons learned from the failures of the retreat during 1942: "There should rarely be frontal attacks and never frontal attacks on narrow fronts. Attacks should follow hooks and come in from flank or rear, while pressure holds the enemy in front."³¹ However, given the paucity of landing craft available, due to the priority of the European theater, Christison had to execute an overland approach.³² With no feasible seaborne assault option available, XV Corps was given the modest objective of driving to secure the port of Maungdaw, via the Mayu Peninsula, thence onwards to Akyab Island, the original objective in the first Arakan campaign. This time however, the plan included advancing on both sides of the

²⁸ Field Marshal Viscount William Slim, *Defeat Into Victory, Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942 – 1945* (UK: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 214.

²⁹ S. Woodburn Kirby, "The War Against Japan III," *History of the Second World War* (London: H.M. Stationary Office, 1965), 41.

³⁰ Field Marshal Viscount William Slim, *Defeat Into Victory, Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942 – 1945* (UK: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 150.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 142.

³² S. Woodburn Kirby, "The War Against Japan III," *History of the Second World War* (London: H.M. Stationary Office, 1965), 50. There had been an increase in various landing craft types arriving from the European theater after the successful Allied invasion of Sicily in late 1943. Notwithstanding these increases, there were not sufficient to conduct the level of operations that Slim and Christison had planned for XV Corps.

Mayu Ridgeline, the semi-mountainous spine that runs parallel to the coastline, and indeed it included the crossing of this terrain feature with a view to threatening the lateral lines of communication into the Burmese interior.

The XV Corps at this time consisted of three infantry divisions; 5 and 7 Indian, and 81 West African Divisions. The 26 Indian Division, refitting in south eastern India, acted as Slim's reserve. Critically Slim focused his attention on the use of massed armor, albeit in small numbers. In the first Arakan they had been used in a piecemeal fashion and had been systematically destroyed by the Japanese from their heavily defended and well sited positions along the main avenues of attack. He was determined not to let this happen again. During this offensive Slim also prepared to test air resupply as a viable option to all formations, rather than the previous over reliance to ground lines of communication. Once Maungdaw port was opened, the intent was to use shipping as another method of resupply, thus offering XV Corps further flexibility to continue its advance without concerning itself with the prospect of being cut off from a source of supply.³³ Slim's plan showed an understanding of the enemy, their capabilities and weaknesses.³⁴ Anthony Brett-James, the official biographer of 5 Indian Division, noted that during the build up to offensive operations in the Arakan in 1943-1944, Slim would conduct daily after action reviews. "Slim summed up at the close of each day, and I was mightily impressed by his penetrating criticisms and appreciation of the detailed tactics...he showed insight into the Japanese minds and methods."³⁵ In essence, Slim directed his forces to become a mobile, flexible, and aggressively minded force that not only felt secure living in the jungle, but also comfortable fighting in it. In so doing, Slim assessed that the demoralized force would be, in the short term, reminded of victory.

³³ Field Marshal Viscount William Slim, *Defeat Into Victory, Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942 – 1945* (UK: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 223-247.

³⁴ Ibid., 150.

³⁵ Ronald Lewin, *Slim, The Standard Bearer* (GB: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1999), 128.

His long-term visualization; that the Indian Army would defeat the Japanese Imperial Land Forces in detail.³⁶

Japanese Fifteenth Army, conducting operations in what they called the Japanese Burma Army Area, was the force tasked with the defence of Burma. The Burma Army Area commander, Lieutenant General Masakazu Kawabe suspected an Allied attack at some stage in 1943. In order to preempt this possibility, he prepared his own offensive campaign. He planned two offensives with four of Fifteenth Army's six divisions in Burma, commanded by Lieutenant General Mutaguchi.³⁷ The first offensive, with one division, the 55, was to act as a diversion, *Operation Ha-Go*, in the Arakan to threaten southern India. Its purpose was to tie down XV Corps, thus denying Slim the ability to reinforce in western Burma, known to the Anglo-Indian forces as the central front. The second offensive, following immediately after *Ha-Go*, with the remaining three divisions, *Operation U-Go*, planned to destroy the remaining Allied forces on the central and northern fronts, specifically IV Corps in the vicinity of Kohima-Imphal. What occurred, therefore, was a meeting engagement of two offensives in the Arakan that were to have a dramatic outcome for not only 1944, but the remainder of the war.

Operational Cudgel, the advance of XV Corps in the Arakan, began in late

³⁶ U.S. Department of Defense, *Field Manual (FM) 3-0 Operations*, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, February 2008, Change No. 1), Ch. 7. Slim sought an indirect operational approach. The definition of operational art in U.S. Army doctrine is "The elements of operational art support the commander in identifying tasks and objectives that link tactical missions to the desired end state. They help refine and focus the operational approach that forms the basis for developing a detailed plan or order. During execution, commanders and staffs consider the elements of operational art as they assess the situation. They adjust current and future operations and plans as the operation unfolds." The specific elements of operational art are; end state and conditions, centers of gravity, direct or in direct approach, decisive points, lines of operation/effort, operational reach, tempo, simultaneity and depth, phasing and transitions, culmination, and risk. Therefore, there is no specific operational level, rather any commander that "links employing tactical forces to achieving the strategic endstate," is a practitioner of operational art. Department of the Army, *Army Doctrine Publication 3-0: Unified Land Operations*. (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2011), 13.

³⁷ Michael Calvert, "Slim, Ballantine's Illustrated History of the Violent Century," *War Leader, Book No.12* (New York: Ballantine Books, Inc., 1973), 69.

November 1943.³⁸ The initial assaults were powerful but unimaginative, and made slow progress. Nevertheless, Slim had much to be optimistic about. The XV Corps, buoyed by early successes continued a steady advance using ground in a more thoughtful and considered way, seeking to outflank the Japanese at every opportunity. In January 1944, Maungdaw was captured. In short order the port was opened and began a steady stream of logistic inflow. After resetting his forces, Christison changed the direction of his attack to unhinge the Japanese. While reordering his forces in early February 1944, the Japanese offensive, *Operation Ha-Go* began. There had been clear indications as to when the Japanese offensive would begin; however, Major General Frank Messervy, commander 7 Indian Division, was caught off guard by elements of 55 Japanese Division having conducted an unidentified flanking maneuver to threaten his Division rear area. Slim, bedridden with dysentery, was also surprised at the speed, timing, and direction of the attack.³⁹ Thus, the Indian Army faced its first test of confidence. Although Japanese confidence was high, and they had the element of surprise, they discounted the possibility that they were facing a new force. Imbued with more mettle, XV Corps stood firm in the face of encirclement. Messervy ordered all 7 Indian Division units to the Division Administrative area, or 'Admin Box.' These defended localities were designed by Slim to be resupplied by air, thus acting as a methodology of countering the Japanese tactic of encirclement. Henceforth, air resupply would sustain 7 Division and all other elements of XV Corps, holding the Japanese at bay. Designed to overstretch the Japanese, who traditionally utilized limited logistic capacity, Slim's new tactic rapidly proved extremely effective. During one of the many hard fought battles, in an ironic twist of fate, 7 Division captured an essential Japanese logistic trail of food and medical supplies

³⁸ Robert Lyman, *Slim, Master of War: Burma and the Birth of Modern Warfare* (UK: Constable & Robinson Ltd, 2004), 145.

³⁹ Ibid., 152-155; Vice-Admiral The Earl Mountbatten of Burma, *Report to the Combined Chiefs of Staff by the Supreme Allied Commander South-East Asia 1943 – 1945* (London. H.M. Stationary Office, 1951), 39-42.

during a flanking attack so favored by the Japanese forces.⁴⁰ Determined Indian Army resistance, the securing of air superiority, and repeated Japanese assaults at the end of an extended line of communication proved their ultimate undoing. By the middle of February the Japanese no longer posed a significant threat. It was not until April 1944 that the remaining elements of 55 Division were destroyed. The Arakan was firmly in Allied hands. Slim's experience and leadership, trust in his subordinates, and creativity; his operational approach, ensured that the Japanese offensive not only culminated, but also caused long term unsustainable losses. The Japanese left over 5,000 dead in the Arakan.⁴¹

The XV Corps adhered closely to the first three of Slim's guiding principles given to Fourteenth Army units; "first, the ultimate intention must always be an offensive one, second, the main idea on which the plan was based must be simple, third, that idea must be held in view throughout and everything else must give way to it."⁴² In so doing, the victory of the Second Arakan campaign created a huge increase in morale across the whole of the Army. The success in defeating the Japanese prepared IV Corps, and the remainder of Fourteenth Army, for the defense of Kohima and Imphal against the main thrust of Fifteenth Japanese Army. This action was the first successful defeat of the Japanese to date. Indeed, Slim noted in *Defeat into Victory*. "It was the turning point of the Burma campaign. For the first time a British force had met, held, and

⁴⁰ Field Marshal Viscount William Slim, *Defeat Into Victory, Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942 – 1945* (UK: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 239.

⁴¹ Geoffrey Matthews, *The Re-Conquest of Burma 1943-1945*. (UK: Wellington Press, 1966), 26-33. The securing of air superiority was a key factor, one to which Slim alludes. The ratio of ten Japanese Zero aircraft to one R.A.F. Spitfire destroyed in combat helped tip the balance in the favor of the Allies. Field Marshal Viscount William Slim, *Defeat Into Victory, Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942 – 1945* (UK: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 242. Slim visualized his endstate and clearly described how the plan was to unfold. Concurrently Slim directed the battle in such a way as to influence the successful outcome, without meddling in the leadership and guidance of XV Corps. Slim understood the element of risk involved with the 'Admin box' theory and confidently reinforced the concept, forcing the Japanese to culminate. For further reading, see Department of the Army, *Army Doctrine Publication 3-0: Unified Land Operations*. (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2011), 13.

⁴² Field Marshal Viscount William Slim, *Defeat Into Victory, Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942 – 1945* (UK: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 209.

decisively defeated a major Japanese attack... British and Indian soldiers had proved themselves, man for man, the masters of the best the Japanese could bring against them... The legend of the Japanese invincibility in the jungle... was smashed.”⁴³ “Thus, the first phase of the Japanese Grand Design ended in serious failure.”⁴⁴ Slim’s “approach to command was to explain to his subordinate commanders what had to be done, rather than to prescribe the precise details of how to do it, and then to let them draw up plans within the overall operational principles he had laid down.”⁴⁵ Bearing this flexibility in mind, Slim did not operate within, using modern parlance, a ‘zero defect’ environment. His style of leadership naturally led to a growth of confidence in not only his immediate subordinates, but also further throughout the chain of command. Within the context of a widely spread force, that had consistently been found wanting in the face of stiff Japanese resistance, this was essential. Throughout this campaign, Slim practiced mission command.⁴⁶ Lyman believes that early failures by Christison were essential for not only him, but also his subordinate commanders to learn from their mistakes.

Fourteenth Army and XV Corps prepared and conducted a limited and indirect offensive. He had sought the essence of the Japanese tactics of envelopment and prepared XV Corps to fight

⁴³ Ibid., 246-247.

⁴⁴ Geoffrey Matthews, *The Re-Conquest of Burma 1943-1945* (UK: Wellington Press, 1966), 33; the Grand Design was also known as Operation “C” to the Japanese High Command; Vice-Admiral The Earl Mountbatten of Burma, *Report to the Combined Chiefs of Staff by the Supreme Allied Commander South-East Asia 1943 – 1945* (London: H.M. Stationary Office, 1951), 39.

⁴⁵ Robert Lyman, *Slim, Master of War: Burma and the Birth of Modern Warfare* (UK: Constable & Robinson Ltd, 2004), 148.

⁴⁶ U.S. Department of Defense, *Field Manual (FM) 3-0 Operations*, (Washington , D.C.: Government Printing Office, February 2008, Change No. 1), Ch. 5. “Mission command in the exercise of authority and direction by the commander using mission orders to enable disciplined initiative within the commander’s intent to empower agile and adaptive leaders in the conduct of full spectrum operations. It is commander led and blends the art of command and the science of control to integrate the warfighting functions to accomplish the mission.” Shimon Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence: The Evolution of Operational Theory* (UK: Frank Cass Publishers, 1997 & 2006), 18-23. Flexibility; “Commanders ensure that orders prepared by the staff follow the precepts of mission orders to facilitate decentralized execution and maximum flexibility of subordinates.”

in this fashion. At the same time, Slim prepared defensive guidance on how to deal with it. By allowing his subordinate commanders flexibility and providing them with the tools for victory, XV Corps and Fourteenth Army had successfully defeated the Japanese for the first time in the Burma Theater. Slim unhinged the Japanese center of gravity.⁴⁷ Based on their hubris, he identified their culmination point of limited logistic capacity. Throughout the remainder of the war in Burma, poor logistic planning, and repeated underestimation of the Indian Army would prove the undoing of Japanese attempts to maintain Burma.

Battle for the Plain; the Defense of Imphal and Kohima

It is now known that at the end of 1942 the Japanese Imperial General Headquarters had already begun to consider a thrust into India; that the plan had begun to develop, at Burma Army level in September, 1943. In January, 1944, Imperial General Headquarters had finally authorized detailed planning to proceed. The invasion of India was to be achieved by splitting open the British-Indian front, sealing off the eastern from the western half, and cutting the lines of communication of both. Each sector was then to be destroyed separately; and the roads through Chittagong and Dimapur laid open to the Japanese Army-at which stage the enemy hoped to incite a general uprising in Bengal.⁴⁸

During the defense of Kohima-Imphal, Slim profited from his ability to visualize Japanese intentions. By this stage of the war, he knew both his superior and subordinate commanders well, thus allowing him flexibility in assessing the situation and to direct the battles in line with his understanding of the enemy.

In February 1944, *Operation Ha Go*, the offensive designed to tie down Slim's forces on

⁴⁷ Michael Howard, and Peter Paret, ed. and trans., Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 595-596. Clausewitz describes a center of gravity as "the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends. That is the point against which all our energies should be directed." Shimon Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence: The Evolution of Operational Theory* (UK: Frank Cass Publishers, 1997 & 2006.), 19. Shimon Naveh describes centers of gravity as physical objectives, an essential resource, a battle grouping, or a terrain feature. Dale C Eikmeier, "Center of Gravity Analysis," *Military Review* (Headquarters, Department of the Army, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.), 2-5. COL D.C. Eikmeier asserts it is best to attack a strategic center of gravity indirectly and in a piecemeal fashion. Thus, attacking operational centers of gravity in sequence, success is over a series of victories, not one single strike that could be costly for the attacker.

⁴⁸ Vice-Admiral The Earl Mountbatten of Burma Mountbatten, *Report to the Combined Chiefs of Staff by the Supreme Allied Commander South-East Asia 1943 – 1945* (London: H.M. Stationary Office, 1951), 39.

his southern front in the Arakan, thus denuding him of the capability to reinforce in the central and northern fronts specifically around Kohima-Imphal, failed. Unperturbed and still believing in their own invincibility, in March 1944, the Japanese launched *Operation U-Go*, their main effort designed to defeat the Indian Army in detail. The initial intent of the plan was to secure the vast logistical base set up by Slim on the Imphal Plain. Latterly Mutaguchi's intent was to set the conditions for an eventual 'March on Delhi', the Indian capital.⁴⁹ Operationally Slim expected a thrust from the Japanese to fall on the central front, knowing that the centrally located and strategically important railhead at Dimapur led to the cities and logistic hubs of Chittagong and Calcutta. It was in these eastern areas of India when Slim had first taken command of XV Corps in 1943 and had had to use Indian Army soldiers to suppress flare-ups of Indian nationalism. The trunk route of rail supply that led to Dimapur was the one that Slim used to build up IV Corps and the defenses of Kohima-Imphal.⁵⁰ Slim had suspected for some time that the Japanese Army would stretch their lines of communication to advance rapidly, a tactic that suited their way of fighting, to maximize their maneuverability, and to outflank IV Corps. It was these very tactics that Slim based his operational plan on defeating by creating a powerfully defended strong point that the Japanese would expend their last efforts trying to secure. Slim identified that the Japanese would seek to separate his two corps, IV, under Lieutenant General Scoones, centered on Kohima-Imphal, and XV, under Lieutenant General Christison, in the Arakan. The Japanese also

⁴⁹ Field Marshal Viscount William Slim, *Defeat Into Victory, Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942 – 1945* (UK: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 238. Robert Lyman, interview by author, London, England, August 18, 2011. The 'March on Delhi' concept is keenly argued by academics. Lyman believes that it was Mutaguchi's intent, not Tokyo's, or indeed General Kawabe's.

⁵⁰ S. Woodburn Kirby, "The War Against Japan III," *History of the Second World War* (London: H.M. Stationary Office, 1965), 22-25. Alongside the railway track ran a four-inch pipeline design to carry oil from Chittagong. A proposed extension to this pipeline and railway track would eventually lead past Dimapur to the Imphal Road and then as close as to the frontier of India and Burma as was necessary. The level of focused support from 1943-44 increased the daily tonnage on the railway line from 1,720 to 4,300. Besides these significant engineering developments, over two hundred extra airfields had been built to support operations in Burma in under a year, thus showing the scale of effort focused on defending the Indian-Burma border.

sought to separate Lieutenant General Joe Stilwell's nationalist Chinese forces in the northern area, thus allowing Fifteenth Japanese Army to deal with the threats individually.

The central front covered a large area, including the Naga Hills, Manipur State, the Upper Chindwin Province, and the northern part of the Chin Hills surrounding Kohima-Imphal. The Imphal Plain itself is "forty miles long and twenty miles deep...[and is] ideally suited for land and air operations against Burma, a fact readily recognized by the Japanese. However, its location and topography made Imphal difficult to supply. Indeed, the logistical problems associated with maintaining IV Corps in Imphal arguably posed Slim's greatest difficulty at this time."⁵¹ Spread, from north to south, on the Dimapur-Kohima-Imphal-Tiddim road, upon which IV Corps based its main supply route, therefore had a 300 hundred mile frontage that ran parallel to the enemy.⁵² With these significant planning considerations in mind, 11 Army Group Commander, Slim's direct superior, General Giffard, gave him the following tasks; first, to clear the Chin Hills as far as the foothills south-east of Tiddim; second, to dominate the area between the Yu and Chindwin rivers, south of the Tamu-Sittanung road; third, to contain and kill Japanese in the Kabaw Valley and the Atwin Yomas; and finally, to push forces across the Chindwin, if the Long-Range Penetration Brigades of the Special Force [Chindits] created a favourable situation.⁵³ With these planning priorities in mind, Slim planned for offensive operations. Slim, from enemy indicators, including captured Japanese papers and prisoner information, found by Scoones' IV Corps, realized that the Japanese main blow would likely fall in the vicinity of the central front, thus he sought to concentrate his forces at Imphal-Kohima for a defensive, and attritional battle in the

⁵¹ Robert Lyman, *Slim, Master of War: Burma and the Birth of Modern Warfare* (UK: Constable & Robinson Ltd, 2004), 167.

⁵² Vice-Admiral The Earl Mountbatten of Burma Mountbatten, *Report to the Combined Chiefs of Staff by the Supreme Allied Commander South-East Asia 1943 – 1945* (London: H.M. Stationary Office, 1951), 45.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 33-34.

first instance, on ground of his choosing.⁵⁴

Slim stacked substantial forces in his favor. Similar to XV Corps' preparation for operations in the Arakan, IV Corps under the careful tutelage of Slim and Scoones had become a tenacious and disciplined force. Before the battle began, IV Corps consisted initially of 17, 23, and 20 Indian Divisions. Further enhancing Scoones' capability, Slim gave 254 Tank Brigade as an armored reserve.⁵⁵ Moreover, XXXIII Corps, under Lieutenant General Montagu Stopford, the War Office theater reserve from India, and 2 British Division would ultimately be employed to complete the destruction of Japanese forces involved in *Operation U-Go*.⁵⁶ Critically for the IV Corps maneuver elements of, 17, 23, and 20 Indian Divisions, forward of Imphal-Kohima, the timing of the order to withdraw to the defended Imphal Plain was all-important. Knowing the ability of the Japanese penetrations and encirclements at speed, to withdraw all forces in a timely and efficient manner, was crucial to the overall success of the plan. Slim, realizing the absolute necessity of logistics ensured that Imphal and, to a lesser extent the garrison at Kohima, were well prepared for the Japanese onslaught. The basic premise was that each of the locations on the Imphal Plain would be self-sustaining for at least ten days.⁵⁷ Relying on strong internal lines of communication, IV Corps would receive resupply by both ground and air means, capitalizing on

⁵⁴ Basil H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy* (New York: Praeger Publishers, Inc., 1974), 334. Liddell Hart offers the following on concentration; "The principles of war, not merely one principle, can be condensed into a single word – concentration. But for truth this needs to be amplified as the 'concentration of strength against weakness.'" Scoones identified that the Japanese intended to cut 17 and 20 Divisions lines of communication thus severing them from their base anchored at Imphal. If this were to happen, Scoones foresaw reserves from Slim being necessary to save these forces from destruction in detail. This formed part of Slim's plan, hence his request for XXXIII Corps, and 2nd British Division. S. Woodburn Kirby, "The War Against Japan III," *History of the Second World War* (London: H.M. Stationary Office, 1965), 187.

⁵⁵ Michael Calvert, "Slim: Ballantine's Illustrated History of the Violent Century," *War Leader, Book No.12*. (New York: Ballantine Books Inc., 1973), 94-95; Robert Lyman, *Slim, Master of War: Burma and the Birth of Modern Warfare* (UK: Constable & Robinson Ltd, 2004), 166.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 96-97.

⁵⁷ Robert Lyman, *Slim, Master of War: Burma and the Birth of Modern Warfare* (UK: Constable & Robinson Ltd, 2004), 171.

the success of XV Corps in the Arakan. Slim and Scoones predicated the withdrawal of the forward units of IV Corps on the unimpeded movements of the divisions from their outlying locations. This, Slim later acknowledged, to be a near-fatal planning assumption as 17 Division got bogged down in early contacts having mistimed the speed of the initial Japanese enveloping movements, and therefore their withdrawal to the well defended 'Admin Box' on the Imphal Plain.⁵⁸

Concurrently to IV Corps preparation at Imphal-Kohima, Slim tasked Major General Orde Wingate and his Chindit Special Force with three tasks to simultaneously conduct deep operations in the rear of the Japanese forces. Under Slim's direct command the Chindits had the following objects: Initially to support the advance of Stilwell's Ledo force on Myitkyina by cutting the communications of the Japanese 18 Division, harassing its rear, and preventing its reinforcement. Secondly, to create a favourable situation for the Yunnan and Stilwell Chinese forces to cross the Salween and enter Burma, and finally to inflict the greatest possible damage and confusion on the enemy in North Burma.⁵⁹ These tasks generated tempo and gave significant operational reach to Fourteenth Army. Although it is certainly true that Slim did not care for Wingate, he believed the unorthodox commander of the Chindits could fundamentally add to the overall plan, even if he thought Wingate misunderstood Japanese capability and capacity. Their tenuous relationship survived, even though the ever provocative Wingate threatened on at least one occasion to go over Slim to Prime Minister Winston Churchill to secure further assets for his already burgeoning force.⁶⁰ The overall assessment, Ronald Lewin notes, of Chindit operations

⁵⁸ Ronald Lewin, *Slim, The Standard Bearer* (GB: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1999), 169-171.

⁵⁹ Field Marshal Viscount William Slim, *Defeat Into Victory, Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942 – 1945* (UK: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 259.

⁶⁰ Robert Lyman, *Slim, Master of War: Burma and the Birth of Modern Warfare* (UK: Constable & Robinson Ltd, 2004), 166. Churchill, at the Quebec Conference in July and August of 1943, offered Wingate a direct line to him. Churchill constantly sought new and imaginative commanders offering the prospect of a rapid victory. Lyman uses a Churchill memorandum to highlight the complex nature of the

during this time, is difficult to assess. Certainly, they succeeded in tying down small elements of Fifteenth Army, and destroyed a significant logistic hub, but in hindsight, it is likely that they were more useful to Stilwell's southerly advance than they were to Fourteenth Army and the battle at Imphal-Kohima. It is a testament to Slim's patience and foresight in the continual use of, and support offered to, the Chindits. Slim's dislike of special forces in general led him to strongly desire their resubordination to conventional forces, as he would have preferred. However, given their level of collective training, their corps de esprit engendered into them by the charismatic Wingate, and the promise of support given by Slim to Stilwell, led to their survival as an organized force in the Burma theater.⁶¹

Japanese Fifteenth Army, commanded by Lieutenant General Mutaguchi, consisted of 31 Division as the northerly assaulting force, 15 Division as the main, or central assaulting force, and 33 Division as the southerly assaulting force. Thus, 31 Division was to seize Kohima, 15 Division Imphal, and 33 Division, Tiddim. In total, the Japanese forces numbered nearly 100,000, of which 53,000 were not to return.⁶² As in the first Arakan campaign, in which the Japanese had been victorious, Mutaguchi assumed that the Indian Army would seek to withdraw once surrounded, and therefore be destroyed in a piecemeal fashion. Mutaguchi, as “‘the victor of Singapore’ in particular, held the British-Indian divisions in such scorn that no question of failure ever entered [his] head.”⁶³ It is pertinent to note that the Japanese forces had only three to four weeks' worth

Wingate-Churchill relationship, and how in 1943 Churchill fundamentally misunderstood not only Slim, but also all the other British commanders. “All the commanders on the spot seem to be competing with one another to magnify their demands and obstacles they have to overcome...I consider Wingate...a man of genius and audacity, and has rightly been discerned by all eyes as a figure above the ordinary level.” By 1944, Wingate's Special Force, the Chindits, had over two divisions of infantry, and their own air force. Although vexed by this situation, Slim allowed it to continue feeling some practical application in the set up.

⁶¹ Ronald Lewin, *Slim, The Standard Bearer*. (GB: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1999), 179.

⁶² Michael Calvert, “Slim, Ballantine's Illustrated History of the Violent Century,” *War Leader, Book No.12* (New York: Ballantine Books Inc, 1973), 107.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 90.

of supply at the commencement of *Operation U-Go*.⁶⁴ If successful, the object was to unleash not an immediate direct attack into India as mentioned above, but to set the conditions for a wave of nationalism aimed at destabilizing British rule throughout eastern, and eventually central India. “With a base in India, the Japanese would then be in a position in which they could consider interfering with the Assam Valley communications to the Allied Northern front, and with the airlift to China.”⁶⁵ Once a logistic hub at Imphal was secure, the likelihood of the stated Japanese object being successful was significant.⁶⁶

On March 8, 1944, a week earlier than expected by the Allies, the Japanese launched *Operation U-Go*.⁶⁷ IV Corps was well prepared to meet the Japanese offensive. However, Slim realized that he did not have sufficient force ratios to decisively defeat the bulk of Fifteenth Japanese Army with IV Corps alone. Acknowledging that the Japanese would be at the end of extended ground lines of communication, Slim planned that the Indian Army strength in armor would defeat the highly mobile but fundamentally outgunned Japanese divisions. Therefore, phasing and transition to the offensive was critical to success. To attack too quickly could invite potential failure by presenting an unguarded flank, thus allowing the Japanese to capitalize on their strengths. On the other hand, if Slim waited too long, the opportunity to complete his objective; the destruction of the Japanese forces, would be missed. Slim, noted that the battle divided into three separate and distinct phases, with a fourth, pursuit, once the conditions were set to regain the initiative:

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Geoffrey Matthews, *The Re-Conquest of Burma 1943-1945* (UK. Wellington Press, 1966), 35.

⁶⁶ Ibid. “In order to defend Burma you may occupy and secure the vital areas of north-eastern India in the vicinity of Imphal by defeating the enemy in that area at an opportune time.” Order given by Japanese Imperial General Headquarters, January 7, 1944.

⁶⁷ Vice-Admiral The Earl Mountbatten of Burma Mountbatten, *Report to the Combined Chiefs of Staff by the Supreme Allied Commander South-East Asia 1943 – 1945* (London. H.M. Stationary Office, 1951), 45.

1. Concentration
2. Attrition
3. Counter-offensive

As the battle took shape in early March 1944, Slim's detailed preparation of land and air forces quickly became clear. Air superiority, quickly gained, ensured decisive effects on the enemy and for friendly forces. Slim's flexible approach to the defense on the Imphal Plain allowed his understanding of the situation to develop rapidly. Although Scoones planned to withdraw his forces to concentrate on Imphal as soon as the Japanese attack began, with the trigger for this withdrawal was the crossing of at least one of the enemy's battalions of the River Chindwin, there was a critical twenty-four hour delay that initially unhinged Slim and Scoones' plan.⁶⁸

Realizing that Scoones desperately needed extra forces as the withdrawal to Imphal from Tiddim and Kohima began, Slim prepared to move 5 Indian Division from the Arakan. If moved by overland means, their delayed impact would become an irrelevance. The decision to move the force by air, with Mountbatten's direct authority, ensured their timely arrival. The risk to Imphal was great at this early stage. Slim's urgent request for air assets and Mountbatten's rapid and decisive response doubtless played a major role. Indeed Mountbatten himself wrote; "Since a delay in several weeks, which a move over our congested land lines of communication would have involved, might have had fatal results, I decided to take the responsibility for ordering the necessary aircraft to be diverted."⁶⁹ Latterly, at the beginning of April 1944, 7 Indian Division

⁶⁸ Ronald Lewin, *Slim, The Standard Bearer* (GB: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1999), 169.

⁶⁹ Vice-Admiral The Earl Mountbatten of Burma Mountbatten, *Report to the Combined Chiefs of Staff by the Supreme Allied Commander South-East Asia 1943 – 1945* (London. H.M. Stationary Office, 1951), 45.

would also be flown from the Arakan to Imphal as reserve forces to both IV and XXXIII Corps.⁷⁰

By the end of March, 17 and 20 Divisions of IV Corps closed in on Imphal. However, success was by no means a foregone conclusion. Kohima was surrounded and cut off.⁷¹ In order to allow Scoones to concentrate his attention on the growing pressure at Imphal, Slim, via Auchinleck, arranged for Stopford to bring forward XXXIII Corps with 2 British Division, and 14 Long Range Patrol (LRP) Brigade under command, to the Dimapur railhead, and thence onwards to reinforce the beleaguered garrison in Kohima.⁷² Once this action was completed, Slim, with a clear preponderance of force, simply allowed the Japanese to wear themselves down. Confident of success, Slim determined to wait for the opportune, or decisive, moment as to strike. After securing a set of divisional Japanese operations orders by a stroke of good fortune on 10 April 1944, Slim ordered all forces on the central front to begin a general offensive. Logistically and operationally poised, IV and XXXIII Corps, with additional air supply assets still in place for supply, were able to begin steady breakouts from Kohima and Imphal. Simultaneously, Stilwell's Chinese forces and Wingate's Chindits continued to harass the Japanese rear whilst also being resupplied by air. "Slim had started to impose his will on the enemy at the earliest possible moment."⁷³ IV and XXXIII Corps gradually made inroads to defeat the remnants of Fifteenth Army. However, it was not until "the middle of May 1944, [that Slim's] worst anxieties were

⁷⁰ Ibid., 47.

⁷¹ Ibid. The Kohima garrison prepared for defense of its perimeter, but only for localized attacks. IV Corps did not plan the Japanese would attack in strength. However, it became clear to Slim that the Japanese were intent on taking Kohima, rather than bypassing it for the railhead at Dimapur. This was indeed fortuitous. The defense of Kohima has become legend in the British Army. For thirteen days the beleaguered garrison, effectively made up of only one infantry battalion, stood firm in the face of a Japanese Division. Indeed, Mountbatten commented that it was something akin to the British/Indian Thermopylae.

⁷² Michael Calvert, "Slim, Ballantine's Illustrated History of the Violent Century," *War Leader, Book No.12* (New York: Ballantine Books Inc, 1973), 97.

⁷³ Ibid., 103.

over.”⁷⁴ Lewin identifies Slim’s understanding and recognition of the Japanese center of gravity, Fifteenth Japanese Army. “The relief of Imphal was not *in itself* so important or urgent as the destruction of Fifteenth Army *in situ*.”⁷⁵ Localized fighting continued on the central front for several weeks. Indeed, it was not until, “[T]he 22 June, [that] 2 British Division and 5 Indian Division met – 29 miles from Imphal and 109 miles from Dimapur – and the Kohima-Imphal road was reopened.”⁷⁶ However, the onset of the monsoon season hampered operations both on the ground and in the air, during which time the roads “an overstatement, when applied to some of the thick trails of mud over which the troops had to advance,” dramatically slowed the chase of the Japanese to the Chindwin River.⁷⁷ For his failure, the Japanese Imperial General Headquarters removed Mutaguchi from command of Fifteenth Army.

Slim’s victory at Imphal-Kohima was emphatic. His visualization and understanding of Japanese Army tactics and procedures allowed him to direct the battles to a successful conclusion. Japanese hubris and continual assaults against strongly defended positions, tenaciously held, with poor lines of communication ultimately proved their undoing. The 'Admin Box' concept had, once again proved highly effective. The Japanese had ambitiously planned to secure the operationally and strategically important railhead at Dimapur, and the logistic deposits on the Imphal Plain within a narrow timeframe. Flexible planning by Slim, coupled with his deft handling of significant numbers of subordinate forces landed the Indian Army a success that set in motion the fall of Japanese forces in Burma. Slim’s understanding of the enemy and terrain undoubtedly set the conditions for success. The Imphal Plain provided the ideal ground in which

⁷⁴ Field Marshal Viscount William Slim, *Defeat Into Victory, Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942 – 1945* (UK: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 332.

⁷⁵ Ronald Lewin, *Slim, The Standard Bearer* (GB: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1999), 185.

⁷⁶ Vice-Admiral The Earl Mountbatten of Burma Mountbatten, *Report to the Combined Chiefs of Staff by the Supreme Allied Commander South-East Asia 1943 – 1945* (London. H.M. Stationary Office, 1951), 67.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 72.

to defeat Mutaguchi's lightly armored and logistically bereft force. Slim acknowledged that the Japanese would underestimate Indian Army capacity. He also knew that they desperately needed the logistic supplies held by IV Corps, thus the Japanese played into his hands. Decisive use of airpower created operational reach and tempo, and allowed freedom of maneuver for ground transports bringing in supplies and reserves. Simultaneous strikes by fighter and bomber aircraft supported troops on the ground and constantly harassed the Japanese lines of communication. Slim again sought the culmination point of the Japanese forces, as he had done in the Arakan. By concentrating his forces, Slim ensured the Japanese could not defeat his forces incrementally as Mutaguchi had planned. Although Slim's approach and guidance cannot be overstated, his subordinates played their respective roles well, thus underscoring his ability as an operational commander. By allowing them freedom of action and flexibility with a comprehensive intent, yet within the framework of a flexible plan, Slim showed himself as an adaptive and pragmatic commander. He provided a firm base from which Fourteenth Army could operate. Logistic planning and execution fundamentally altered the balance on the central front. Essentially, Slim played to his strengths and concentrated on exploiting Japanese weakness. Poorly led by Mutaguchi and the other Japanese general officers, the Japanese infantryman fought extremely well at the tactical level. Indeed, the Japanese commanders displayed a "rigidity and [an] inability to adjust quickly to changed operational conditions."⁷⁸ Slim, through concise and flexible planning, sound preparation, and his understanding of his strengths and enemy weakness delivered a potent success. The plan was not genius in its inception. Based on attrition, rather than maneuver, it required significant numbers of unplanned reserves. It was Slim at his most direct and pugnacious best. Mutaguchi underestimated his opponent and Fourteenth Army's discipline and willingness to fight. Indeed, the Indian Army's tenacious defense, especially at Kohima, had

⁷⁸ Geoffrey Matthews, *The Re-Conquest of Burma 1943-1945* (UK: Wellington Press, 1966), 46.

more in common with Imperial Japanese Army than the hollow shell it had been two years previously. “The battles of Imphal and Kohima...were to be the decisive battles of the war in South-East Asia Command.”⁷⁹ Slim’s correct assessment paved the way Fourteenth Army and its subordinate commander’s eventual success.

Operations Capital, Extended Capital, and Dracula

“When it became clear that the Japanese had been defeated in the battles of Imphal and Kohima, the question arose of evolving an Allied strategy for the campaign in S.E. Asia in 1944-45. Partly because of divergencies in strategic attitude between the British and American allies and the priorities accorded to the European and Pacific theatres, a long and confused strategic debate ensued throughout the second half of 1944.”⁸⁰

The strategic situation in Burma at this stage saw confusion and differing opinions in both London and Washington. Both the United States and Great Britain sought divergent ways to secure the same endstate. This left Mountbatten in a difficult position. In essence, the British high command, not Slim, favored a sea-borne invasion of southern Burma, and the Americans an overland option to secure a ground line of communication to China. The British plan, pushed by Prime Minister Churchill, sought the indirect approach due to his fear of an overland battle turning into a prolonged and costly fight that was unaffordable in terms of both equipment and manpower. Although Churchill’s fears were understandable, they showed his lack of currency since they did not reflect the successful actions on the ground at Kohima and Imphal. To Churchill, the retreat was still firmly in the forefront of his mind. The Americans favored opening the land route to take pressure off the air resupply to Chinese forces, thus continuing their relationship with nationalist forces under Chiang Kai-Shek. In June 1944, the Combined Chiefs of Staff gave the Supreme Allied Commander, Mountbatten, direction to build two separate plans that supported the strategic direction of both nations, *Operations Capital* and *Dracula*. *Operation*

⁷⁹ S. Woodburn Kirby, “The War Against Japan IV,” *History of the Second World War* (London: H.M. Stationary Office, 1965), 1.

⁸⁰ Geoffrey Matthews, *The Re-Conquest of Burma 1943-1945* (UK: Wellington Press, 1966), 58.

Capital was the name given to the overland advance and *Dracula* as the sea and airborne invasion of Rangoon.⁸¹ However, acceptance of these plans did not take place until after the Octagon Conference in Quebec held 11-16 September 1944. The conference itself, although overtly a success, found friction points between the British Chiefs of Staff, Churchill, and the Americans. The principal points of tension lay with Churchill believing that the British Chiefs of Staff were conspiring against him with regard to strategy in Burma. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Field Marshal Lord Alanbrooke, noted in his diary on 10 and 14 September 1944. “[Winston Churchill] produced the most ridiculous arguments to prove that operations could be speeded up...He knows no details, has only got half the picture in his mind, talks absurdities and makes my blood boil to listen to all his nonsense. [The] PM had, on his own, wired to Dickie Mountbatten to find out how he was [intending] to capture Burma...Dickie had wired back giving full details of the series of changes in plans that occurred. As a result Winston had accused us all...of purposely concealing changes of plan from him to keep him in the dark.”⁸² Churchill’s accusations referred to the number of divisions in the plans for *Operation Capital*. Although not fundamentally important to Slim and his planning at Fourteenth Army, it shows the level of complexity that Mountbatten had to contend with for guidance on how to prosecute the remainder of the campaign.

In India, Mountbatten had grown increasingly frustrated with General Giffard, commander 11 Army Group. Although a trusted and respected General, he lacked Slim’s vision, and the political drive of Mountbatten. Mountbatten finally lost patience with Giffard and

⁸¹ Vice-Admiral The Earl Mountbatten of Burma, *Report to the Combined Chiefs of Staff by the Supreme Allied Commander South-East Asia 1943 – 1945* (London: H.M. Stationary Office, 1951), 74-83. Ironically, both Mountbatten and Slim favored the overland approach. Michael Calvert, *Slim, Ballantine’s Illustrated History of the Violent Century. War Leader, Book No.12*. (New York: Ballantine Books Inc., 1973), 120-122.

⁸² Field Marshal Lord Alanbrooke, *War Diaries 1939-1945* (GB: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2001), 590-592.

requested his removal. For six months, Giffard remained in place due to political infighting between the British and the Americans as to who would become the next land forces commander. His removal was of regret to Slim who trusted Giffard, and with whom he enjoyed a genial relationship. Lieutenant General Sir Oliver Leese replaced Giffard in November 1944. Leese assumed command of the newly created post of Commander Allied Land Forces South East Asia, superseding the now defunct 11 Army Group. This new post neatly subordinated all Allied Land Forces under one command, something that had been lacking, and had urgently required addressing. Leese's appointment eventually proved unsatisfactory to both Mountbatten and Slim, although it did not weaken the relationship between the two. Indeed, if anything, it served to underscore the mutual trust and respect in one another. Leese struggled with the Slim-Mountbatten relationship, and although he never showed it, there is little doubt that he resented the closeness between his superior and subordinate commanders.⁸³ Slim and Mountbatten's relationship directly influenced *Operations Capital* and *Extended Capital* with Mountbatten expending considerable political capital on the securing of extra aircraft to ensure Fourteenth Army supplies continued to flow over the increasingly tenuous ground lines of communication as it advanced east of the Chindwin and Irrawaddy rivers after the breakout from Kohima-Imphal.⁸⁴ *Operation Dracula*, delayed principally due to logistical issues stemming from the European theater, allowed the overland approach, *Operation Capital* to move forward immediately in the latter half of 1944.

⁸³ Robert Lyman, *Slim, Master of War: Burma and the Birth of Modern Warfare* (UK: Constable & Robinson Ltd, 2004), 235-237. Lyman quotes directly from Leese's letters to his wife indicating his displeasure of his relationship with Mountbatten and Slim. His frustration lies principally with his inability to exercise command over Slim. He felt repeatedly cut out from the decision making process and was suspicious of Fourteenth Army and their methods. As a former commander of Eighth Army in North Africa, Leese brought with him a number of his staff officers from his former command. Leese's decision created an atmosphere of unwanted tension between those with service in the North African and European theaters, and those from the South East Asia.

⁸⁴ Ronald Lewin, *Slim, The Standard Bearer* (GB: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1999), 201-213.

The Fourteenth Army at this stage comprised of two corps. IV Corps, a more agile force, had two infantry divisions, a tank brigade and a further infantry brigade under command. It also had a more aggressive and talented commander, Lieutenant General Frank Messervy, who had by this stage replaced Scoones. XXXIII Corps was stronger in manpower, with three infantry divisions, a tank brigade, and a further additional infantry brigade, under Lieutenant General Montagu Stopford. XV Corps, under Lieutenant General Philip Christison, remained in the Arakan resubordinating to Leese and was therefore no longer under the operational command of Fourteenth Army. It would only become involved in further Fourteenth Army operations if *Operation Dracula* was employed. Slim focused all his attention on IV and XXXIII Corps, and they were well prepared to advance to defeat the Japanese in open terrain.⁸⁵ Finally, Slim maintained an army reserve, 5 Division.⁸⁶

Facing Fourteenth Army was the remnants of Fifteenth Japanese Army. Reorganized under the command of Lieutenant General Katamura the force structure included 15, 31, and 33 Divisions, now somewhat reduced after the failure of the attacks at Kohima-Imphal. Katamura also gained 34 Independent Mixed Brigade shipped in from Indo-China. Finally, in October 1944, 53 Division transferred to Fifteenth Army control.⁸⁷ As a commander, Katamura had significant character differences to his predecessor, Mutaguchi. Flexible and defensively minded, he supported his superior commander with thoughtful actions, as opposed to a willingness to throw his men's lives away with a callousness born of the honor system. In essence, however, it was not

⁸⁵ Field Marshal Viscount William Slim, *Defeat Into Victory, Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942 – 1945* (UK: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 382-383. The two corps had prepared furiously for the switch in terrain.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 388. Messervy, formerly commander 7 Division, had replaced Scoones as commander IV corps at Slim's insistence. Slim offers strong praise of Messervy saying he "had the temperament, sanguine, inspiring, and not too calculating of odds, that I thought would be required for the tasks I designed for 4 Corps."

⁸⁷ Geoffrey Matthews, *The Re-Conquest of Burma 1943-1945* (UK: Wellington Press, 1966), 68.

only Katamura who faced Slim, but Lieutenant General Kimura. Kimura had replaced Lieutenant General Kawabe, the former Burma Army Area Commander. Slim initially assumed that Kimura would display the same lack of strategic and operational vision as his predecessor had shown at Kohima-Imphal. Kawabe, however, showed far greater flexibility and a surprising willingness to ignore orders from the Imperial Japanese High Command.⁸⁸ The moral courage shown by Kimura 1944-45 certainly did much to prolong the Japanese defence of Burma, even in the face of overwhelming Allied success.⁸⁹

During the strategic planning phase, a brief lull had taken place in fighting in central and southern Burma. The summer monsoon slowed operations, but importantly Slim continued to push the breakout of Fourteenth Army from Kohima-Imphal. He pushed Stopford's XXXIII Corps to continue the pursuit of the Fifteenth Army. Slim knew that in order to seal the fate of the Japanese, they must not be given a moments respite. Although severely battered, the Japanese forces maintained a capacity for localized counterattacks, and the Japanese High Command sought to regain the initiative if only to find breathing space, rather than to restart a general offensive.

Thus, the essence of *Operation Capital* was the destruction of the remainder of Japanese Land Forces in Burma.⁹⁰ Given to Slim by Giffard, before his removal as 11 Army Group Commander, were the following three phases: phase one, the occupation, by a land advance and

⁸⁸ Field Marshal Viscount William Slim, *Defeat Into Victory, Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942 – 1945* (UK: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 379-380. Slim notes himself of the change of command from Kawabe to Kimura: "I expected him to conform to type, to be over-bold, inflexible, and reluctant to change a plan once made...he would never dare lose face by giving up territory without a struggle. The Japanese were always military optimists."

⁸⁹ Geoffrey Matthews, *The Re-Conquest of Burma 1943-1945* (UK: Wellington Press, 1966), 60-88.

⁹⁰ Vice-Admiral The Earl Mountbatten of Burma, *Report to the Combined Chiefs of Staff by the Supreme Allied Commander South-East Asia 1943 – 1945*. (London. H.M. Stationary Office, 1951), 83. The object, given to Mountbatten by the Combined Chiefs of Staff on 16 September was "the destruction and expulsion of all Japanese forces in Burma at the earliest possible date."

an airborne operation, of the Kalewa-Kalemyo area. Phase two an overland and airborne advance to secure the Shwebo plain, and phase three, the liberation of Burma, as far south as the line Pakokku-Mandalay, where Fourteenth Army would make a junction with Northern Central Area Command about Maymo.⁹¹ To complete these objects, Slim felt that he must use his armor, artillery, and land forces in a more maneuverist fashion than the attritionally based context of the battles at Kohima-Imphal. Indeed, as Fourteenth Army moved east towards Mandalay, the terrain changed to open and dry ground rather than the jungles of western Burma. In order to complete this task, “I wanted to fight the battle on ground where our superiority in the air and in armour would have its greatest scope, that is, in comparatively open country. The obvious place was the Shwebo plain, a great loop of land enclosed between the Irrawaddy and the Chindwin, immediately north-west of Mandalay.”⁹²

Therefore, Slim planned to advance towards the Shwebo plain with two corps forward believing that the Japanese would defend west of the Irrawaddy River.⁹³ However, this was not the case. The Japanese, under the direction of Kimura began withdrawing south and east across the Irrawaddy River. Their intention was not to fight with their backs to a formidable natural obstacle, but to clear it and prepare the defenses of Mandalay, whilst seeking to disrupt Fourteenth Army as it attempted to cross. As IV and XXXIII Corps advanced, they received scant attention from the small pockets of Japanese who remained behind to defend the main body as they crossed the Irrawaddy. Intelligence reports from the advance guard units of Fourteenth Army

⁹¹ Field Marshal Viscount William Slim, *Defeat Into Victory, Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942 – 1945* (UK: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 376. N.C.A.C stands for Northern Combat Area Command. These were Chinese forces supported by United States soldiers under the command of General Joe Stilwell.

⁹² Ibid., 379. Slim describes the ground in and around the Shwebo plain. “This is the ‘dry belt’, the central plain of Burma. Here the country is generally flat or undulating, covered in cultivation with some scrub patches, easily passable, sprinkled with villages, criss-crossed by many cart tracks and some roads. Over considerable areas it is so open and, except in the rainy season, so dusty, as to offer something like desert conditions. It would suit us admirably.”

⁹³ Ibid., 391. Slims’ object remained throughout the destruction of the Japanese Army.

all told the same story. “Captured papers, liberated Burmese, the absence of prepared defenses...the Japanese had no intention of making a stand.”⁹⁴ In other words, Slim did not want to lose the initiative gained, nor did he want to expose his forces crossing the Irrawaddy where the Japanese could gain the upper hand. With substantial airpower at his disposal and significant armored capability, Slim did not want a grinding attritional battle for Mandalay, thus playing into the hands of the Japanese. Kimura needed time to reset his forces, bring resupply forward and to set the conditions to begin offensive operations after the monsoon season, Slim sought to deny him that luxury.

As the Japanese rapidly withdrew to Mandalay, Slim paused to re frame the operational environment. “It was time for me to use a little of that flexibility of mind that I had so often urged on my subordinates.”⁹⁵ The IV Corps had only one division across the Chindwin, this allowed Slim flexibility in his plans if he decided to change *Operation Capital* to conform to the new shape of the Japanese forces. Given the following planning considerations, the necessary time to move forces into position and still facing a dangerous enemy, any changes to the plan would have to be completed in the shortest possible time.⁹⁶ Thus, *Operation Extended Capital* came into being. Through deception, use of ground, operational tempo, and air mobility offering extended operational reach, Slim sought to unbalance the Japanese forces being making Kimura believe that the British object was Mandalay and not Meiktila to the south. “My new plan...was based on XXXIII Corps, with 19 Indian Division transferred to it, forcing crossings of the river north and west of Mandalay, thus drawing towards itself the greatest possible concentration of Kimura’s divisions. Meanwhile, IV Corps, moving secretly south up the Gangaw Valley, would suddenly

⁹⁴ Ronald Lewin, *Slim, The Standard Bearer* (GB: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1999), 208.

⁹⁵ Field Marshal Viscount William Slim, *Defeat Into Victory, Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942 – 1945* (UK: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 390.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 391.

appear at Pakokku, seize a crossing, and, without pause, strike violently with armoured and airborne forces at Meiktila.”⁹⁷

Meiktila and Thazi, both south of Mandalay by approximately seventy miles, had become the hub of logistical power on which Kimura had begun to rest. “Supporting both Thirty-third and Fifteenth Army’s [they, Meiktila and Thazi] were in every sense the ‘beating heart’ of the Burma Army Area... [they] formed a natural location for supply and ammunition dumps, airfields and hospitals. If Slim cut off...Katamura’s corps from his vital logistical structure, the Japanese ability to resist 33 Corps’ inexorable pressure in the north around Mandalay would be fatally weakened. Slim recognized that without Meiktila Kimura could not hope to sustain a prolonged battle for Mandalay.”⁹⁸ With the appreciation of the enemy situation in hand, Slim, with the backing of Leese and Mountbatten began to re set his forces.⁹⁹

In order to deceive the Japanese, Slim tasked XXXIII Corps with securing powerful crossings north and west of Mandalay, an absolute necessity to make Kimura believe that the main thrust of Fourteenth Army would still come from those directions. Concurrently, IV Corps began to make the huge logistical preparations necessary for the move south.¹⁰⁰ Just prior to

⁹⁷ Ibid.,393. In the final analysis there were insufficient aircraft to conduct an airborne operation, however, had there been the availability, Slim would have used them. This refutes an argument sometimes leveled at Slim of being unable to use new tactics such as airborne or special forces in the field.

⁹⁸ Robert Lyman, *Slim, Master of War: Burma and the Birth of Modern Warfare* (UK: Constable & Robinson Ltd, 2004), 242.

⁹⁹ Vice-Admiral The Earl Mountbatten of Burma, *Report to the Combined Chiefs of Staff by the Supreme Allied Commander South-East Asia 1943 – 1945* (London: H.M. Stationary Office, 1951), 103. The plan, according to Mountbatten “was as brilliant in its conception as in its subsequent successful execution; for it laid the foundation for the complete destruction of the Japanese Army in Burma.”

¹⁰⁰ Ronald Lewin, *Slim: The Standard Bearer* (GB: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1999), 210. Slim delivered orders for Operation Extended Capital to Stopford and Messervy on 19 December 1944. Field Marshal Viscount William Slim, *Defeat Into Victory, Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942 – 1945* (UK: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 404. Slim notes himself the challenges faced by IV Corps in the preparation and execution of this change in plan. The following paragraph indicates graphically the situation facing IV Corps. “I [Slim] switched them from the left of the army to its extreme right, but they had to rearrange the three-hundred-mile march of the whole corps by a very inferior fair-weather track winding through hills. For miles at a time they had, in fact, to make the track. It was difficult enough to get

issuing orders for *Operation Extended Capital*, the transport aircraft promised to Slim for day to day operations and the requisite build up of supplies and equipment, were taken at the behest of Chiang Kai-Shek due to a potential threat by the Japanese against a critical air hub in China used to resupply his forces. This did not dramatically alter the execution of *Operation Extended Capital*, but the later start time was to have greater ramifications as the monsoon period neared in May 1945.¹⁰¹ However, Mountbatten was not only able to secure new aircraft removed at this critical juncture, but through skillful and resourceful adaptation managed to, by the middle of January 1945, have 145 aircraft available for Slim and Fourteenth Army, five more than the plan demanded.¹⁰²

The IV Corps movement south, codenamed *Operation Cloak*, was conducted over three hundred miles, used a single track, maintained radio silence, and, through boundless improvisation, exploited the rivers as logistical highways. A false IV Corps headquarters pumped out spurious information to conceal its real movement. “Operationally this signal deception

three-ton lorries over it, but when it came to passing through the tank brigade with its fifty-ton load of tank and transporter, coaxing their long wheel bases round tight bends with one edge over a sheer drop, constantly reversing and going forward again, the march became a nightmare in slow motion. The gradients and the dust were at times such that the tanks had to tow their own transporters.”

¹⁰¹ Ronald Lewin, *Slim: The Standard Bearer* (GB: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1999), 229-232. The delay of two to three weeks did not affect operations in Mandalay and Meiktila. It did however latterly in the run south for Rangoon. In 1945, the monsoon broke early thus denying 14th Army and the forces of Extended Capital the ultimately pyrrhic victory of Operation Dracula, the airborne and naval assault of Rangoon. Instead, soldiers of XV Corps who had been operating in the Arakan had the honor of securing the critical port. The Japanese vacated Rangoon days before the launch of Operation Dracula. Field Marshal Viscount William Slim, *Defeat Into Victory, Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942 – 1945* (UK: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 396. The removal of the aircraft came as a surprise to Slim. Indeed, the first Slim knew of their departure was as they took off “I was awakened in my headquarters at Imphal by the roar of engines. I knew loaded aircraft were due to leave for 33 Corps later in the morning, but I was surprised at this early start. The supplies in the aircraft, already loaded for Fourteenth Army, were dumped on the Imphal strip and the machines took off.”

¹⁰² Field Marshal Viscount William Slim, *Defeat Into Victory, Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942 – 1945* (UK: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 396. The removal of the aircraft came as a surprise to Slim. Indeed, the first Slim knew of their departure was as they took off “I was awakened in my headquarters at Imphal by the roar of engines. I knew loaded aircraft were due to leave for 33 Corps later in the morning, but I was surprised at this early start. The supplies in the aircraft, already loaded for Fourteenth Army, were dumped on the Imphal strip and the machines took off.”

scheme was a real annoyance to corps and divisional commanders and its enforcement a test of patience and discipline, but it paid an excellent dividend. The enemy was completely deceived.”¹⁰³ Throughout the move, air cover and air transport was at the forefront of Slim’s mind. For the attack on Meiktila to be a success, troops flown forward by air, coupled with bombers and fighters, would be necessary to complete the defeat and subsequent defense of the town. This was in the full knowledge that Kimura, once unhinged, would seek to re-deploy his forces to mitigate the loss of his supply nexus at Meiktila. This would have the added benefit of relieving pressure on XXXIII Corps who for January and February 1945 faced the brunt of Kimura’s forces north and west of Mandalay. IV Corps, by the end of January 1945, was prepared to cross the Irrawaddy west of Meiktila and conduct a rapid advance. Concurrently, XXXIII Corps began to conduct actual crossings to the west and north of Mandalay. Slim’s deception of Kimura had the added reality of using 19 Indian Division, a unit from IV Corps, attacking Mandalay from the west. So good was the deception, that intelligence reports indicated that Kimura believed that IV Corps would follow on from the bridgehead in line with the deception plan envisaged by Slim.

With the conditions set, IV Corps launched its crossings of the Irrawaddy at Nyaungu, some fifty miles west of Meiktila on 22 February 1945. The plan was a six-phase operation, based on simplicity, it required audacity, rapid maneuver, tempo, and the surprise so carefully prepared and maintained throughout the march south. The phases were:

1. Exploitation east from the Nyaungu bridgehead by the two mechanized brigades of 17 Indian Division and 255 Indian Tank Brigade
2. Concentration at Mahlaing

¹⁰³ Ibid., 395-397. Slim imposed upon his Chief Engineer, Brigadier Hasted, huge demands to set the conditions for assaults on Meiktila and Mandalay, particularly the former. The radio silence was only to be broken when command and control necessitated it. When it was broken, IV Corps indicated that it was 11th East African Division, a unit that had been withdrawn from Burma.

3. The capture of the airstrip at Meiktila to fly in a brigade of 17 Indian Division
4. The isolation of Meiktila
5. The capture of Meiktila
6. The capture of Thazi¹⁰⁴

Messervy, commanding IV Corps, realized that to build forces on the eastern bank of the Irrawaddy could reduce the impact of surprise, launched 17 Indian Division and 255 Indian Tank Brigade as soon as they were fully across. Within three days, an airstrip only fifteen miles from Meiktila was in Allied hands. This allowed Major General Cowan, commander 17 Indian Division, to fly in 99 Brigade from Imphal to support his assault on Meiktila. Beginning on 28 February and ending on 3 March, of the 12,000 Japanese defending Meiktila 5,000 were killed, a further 5,000 wounded, and only forty-seven taken prisoner.¹⁰⁵ Although initially defeated, the Japanese fought hard to regain Meiktila. Kimura, realizing now that his southern flank had been uncovered, sought to destroy 17 Indian Division and the IV Corps' bridgehead at Nyaungu. The Japanese successfully severed the ground line of communication between the two positions, thus Allied air power became increasingly decisive as both locations fought on isolated from one another by the Japanese. However, the damage to the Japanese was irreparable. Slim had completely confused Kimura as to his intentions and where the blows would come from. Unsurprisingly, Kimura began to feed reinforcements to Meiktila from Mandalay in a piecemeal fashion, trying to minimize the damage done to his logistic base. This merely played to Fourteenth Army strengths. The change from the attritional battles of Kohima-Imphal to the sublime maneuver to unlock central Burma became, for a brief while, attritional once more. Relying on the hard won experience of fighting from an 'Admin Box' with supply only from the

¹⁰⁴ Geoffrey Matthews, *The Re-Conquest of Burma 1943-1945* (UK: Wellington Press, 1966), 73.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 73-74.

air, the eventual outcome, although not guaranteed, fell firmly on Slim's side. IV Corps' 17 Indian Division, under Cowan's guidance, stood firm.¹⁰⁶

Simultaneous action, Slim knew, would be essential to seal Kimura's fate. Thus, while Kimura struggled to solve the Meiktila problem, Slim wanted to wrest Mandalay from him before the monsoon season and whilst he had the upper hand. It gave Slim his chance to conduct not only the "major battle I desired, but the chance to repeat our old hammer and anvil tactics: XXXIII Corps the hammer from the north against the anvil of IV Corps at Meiktila-and the Japanese between."¹⁰⁷ Geoffrey Matthews describes the situation thus; "Kimura faced with the stroke against his flank at Meiktila and hammered on his front north of Mandalay was caught in the trap which Slim had so skillfully prepared. He could only re-inforce one sector at the expense of the other – and both were vital. The initiative had passed decisively to Slim."¹⁰⁸ Around Mandalay, to the north of Meiktila, the units of Stopford's XXXIII Corps broke through exploiting rapid success as Kimura struggled to defend his increasingly untenable position. During the defense of Mandalay, the Japanese showed their tenacity in battle, however, it was uncoordinated. "Japanese resistance outside Mandalay was now reduced to small parties, roaming the countryside with little knowledge of what was happening around them."¹⁰⁹ The British

¹⁰⁶ "The loss of Meiktila created for the Japanese a desperate situation and they reacted characteristically by concentrating all the troops they could spare in an all-out counter-offensive to retake it." S. Woodburn Kirby, "The War Against Japan IV," *History of the Second World War* (London: H.M. Stationary Office, 1965), 427.

¹⁰⁷ Field Marshal Viscount William Slim, *Defeat Into Victory, Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942 – 1945* (UK: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 393-394.

¹⁰⁸ Geoffrey Matthews, *The Re-Conquest of Burma 1943-1945* (UK: Wellington Press, 1966), 77. Slim describes the situation as seen by him. "The crisis of the great battle was at hand. Kimura's gaze was fixed on Mandalay and its neighbourhood, his troops faced north and were marching hard to meet us there, yet he could not fail within a few days, perhaps hours, to awake to the danger behind him at Meiktila." Field Marshal Viscount William Slim, *Defeat Into Victory, Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942 – 1945* (UK: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 466-467.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 455-468. Slim describes the ferocity and dedication of the Japanese soldier in defense. "A Japanese soldier with a 100-kilo aircraft bomb between his knees, holding a large stone, poised above the fuse would crouch in a foxhole. When the attacking tank passed over the almost invisible hole, he

assaults in Mandalay were such that by 20 March 1945 the British Union flag fluttered from the top of Fort Dufferin, the final bastion of Japanese defense in Mandalay. It had been a difficult nut to crack, however it allowed Slim to focus all his attention on the race to Rangoon before the monsoon season began.¹¹⁰

Following the collapse of the Japanese defenses in both Meiktila and Mandalay Slim sought to advance on Rangoon. Ordered to do so by Leese on 27 February 1945, Slim had already prepared an overland approach, whilst Leese maintained that naval and airborne forces of XV Corps should be prepared to act as a fall back option should the monsoon put pay to IV Corps efforts.¹¹¹ A modified *Operation Dracula* was now necessary in order to fit the new timeline proposed by Leese and Mountbatten.¹¹² As “Fourteenth Army approached within striking distance of Rangoon from the north, an amphibious and airborne assault-our old friend ‘Dracula’-should be put in from the sea. I had always opposed ‘Dracula’ if it were to be done at the expense of Fourteenth Army.”¹¹³ Now, with sufficient force elements, a retreating Japanese Army and a highly capable and organized air force supply and fighter-bomber system in place, Slim wanted to grant Fourteenth Army the prize of Rangoon. Slim was concerned by overstretch of his own

would drop the stone-then bomb, man, and, it was hoped, tank would all go up together. Luckily the device was not very effective and accounted for more Japanese than tanks.”

¹¹⁰ Field Marshal Viscount William Slim, *Defeat Into Victory, Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942 – 1945* (UK: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 469-470. “Fort Dufferin in Mandalay City, was a great rectangular, walled enclosure, containing one and quarter square miles of parkland, dotted with official residences, barracks, and other buildings...The crenellated, twenty-foot-high outer walls of the fort were faced with thick brickwork and backed by earth embankments seventy feet wide at their base. All round lay the moat, over two hundred feet wide, water filled...” Indeed, in order to breach this formidable obstacle, 2,000-pound bombs had to be used to dent the outer defenses for the infantry to exploit. Vice-Admiral The Earl Mountbatten of Burma, *Report to the Combined Chiefs of Staff by the Supreme Allied Commander South-East Asia 1943 – 1945* (London: H.M. Stationary Office, 1951), 139.

¹¹¹ Ronald Lewin, *Slim, The Standard Bearer* (GB: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1999), 227.

¹¹² S. Woodburn Kirby, “The War Against Japan IV,” *History of the Second World War*. (London. H.M. Stationary Office, 1965), 327-329. Read this reference for further information on the internal debate between A.L.F.S.E.A. and Mountbatten’s headquarters.

¹¹³ Field Marshal Viscount William Slim, *Defeat Into Victory, Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942 – 1945* (UK: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 481.

forces, the difficulty of the ground, the state of the mechanized equipment in IV Corps, and the fact that the enemy, not yet defeated, still offered a significant threat. Nevertheless, “I knew the risks, we were winning. We had kicked over the ant-hill; the ants were running about in confusion. Now was the time to stamp on them.”¹¹⁴ For the revised *Operation Dracula* to succeed, the securing of Toungoo airfield, roughly one hundred and sixty miles north of Rangoon, was necessary to provide suitable air cover.¹¹⁵ Once Toungoo was secured by IV Corps; the push south continued with the troops on half rations. Slim gave this order to increase the levels of fuel and ammunition to the armored spear of the advance. Tragically, the weather was not on Slim’s side. Forty-one miles north of Rangoon, 17 Indian Division halted in the face of appalling rain two weeks earlier than predicted. It was 1 May 1945. The Fourteenth Army was denied the prize so tantalizingly close to them. On 2 May, troops from Christison’s XV Corps, directed by Leese, landed in waves at Rangoon.¹¹⁶ Already evacuated by the Japanese as being militarily untenable, the Indian Army reclaimed Rangoon.

Slim’s decisions throughout this stage of the campaign continued to prove his capacity for mission command. Once his grand design was in place, he released his corps commanders to

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 485.

¹¹⁵ Field Marshal Viscount William Slim, *Defeat Into Victory, Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942 – 1945* (UK: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 498-500. Toungoo had a group of excellent airfields, a fact lost by neither Slim nor Kimura. During the race from Meiktila to Toungoo IV Corps bypassed enemy strength. The Japanese faced a torrid advance through an area held by the Karen Tribe. Supported by Force 136, a British special force unit, directed air attack, and constant harassment of convoys, demolitions, and general disruption, the Japanese lost the race.

¹¹⁶ George MacDonald Fraser, *Quartered Safe Out Here: A Harrowing Tale of World War II* (NY: Skyhorse Publishing, Inc., 2007), 156. George MacDonald Fraser describes the monsoon from a soldier’s point of view. “If you haven’t seen the monsoon burst, it’s difficult to imagine. There are the first huge drops, growing heavier and heavier, and then God opens the sluices and the jets of a million high-pressure hoses are being directed straight down, and the deluge comes with a great roar, crashing against the leaves and rebounding from the earth for perhaps a minute – after that the earth is under a skin of water...the din is deafening.” Field Marshal Viscount William Slim, *Defeat Into Victory, Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942 – 1945*. (UK: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 505-507.

conduct the battle as they saw fit.¹¹⁷ Indeed, Slim's trust in Messervy paid huge dividends. It is unlikely that Scoones would have been able to pull off such a feat without a more firm hand of guidance from Slim. "The speedy and overwhelming success of Fourteenth Army's advance from the Chindwin to Rangoon was largely due to the flexibility in planning, tactics and organization shown by Slim and his commanders."¹¹⁸

Although Kimura committed his reserves in a piecemeal fashion, the defense of Meiktila stands out as an outstanding display of courage by Cowan's troops.¹¹⁹ Critically, Slim maximized the ability of Fourteenth Army to exploit success and maintain momentum through exceptional use of his logistic supply. Preparing IV Corps march south, boats and pontoons were constructed and utilized to provide a logistic highway. Similarly, the engineers opened airfields to fly in equipment to both Meiktila and Mandalay. Indeed, during IV Corps push to Rangoon, before *Operation Dracula* was launched, armored units were specifically pushed to airfield locations, bypassing Japanese positions, in order to maximize operational reach.¹²⁰ The uncovering of Kimura's weak southern flank by Slim undoubtedly ranks as one of the most audacious feats of military cunning. The plan, executed under the most trying of conditions, stood firm in the face of significant enemy, terrain, and logistical challenges, it stands as a perfect example of the indirect approach.¹²¹ "The bold thrust to Meiktila, later aptly described by Kimura as the master-stroke,

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 412. "I left it to corps commanders to select the exact locations for their crossings, to choose which divisions should make them, and to prepare the best tactical plans and arrangement that the meager resources I had allotted them would permit."

¹¹⁸ S. Woodburn Kirby, "The War Against Japan IV," *History of the Second World War* (London: H.M. Stationary Office, 1965), 428.

¹¹⁹ Geoffrey Matthews, *The Re-Conquest of Burma 1943-1945* (UK: Wellington Press, 1966), 72; Ronald Lewin, *Slim: The Standard Bearer* (GB: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1999), 224-225.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 78. The Chindwin and Irrawaddy Rivers carried 600-700 tons of equipment per day supplying 14th Army. Air supply remained one of the decisive factors throughout this, the latter stages of the war in Burma. At its peak, 77% of 14th Army's supply came by air.

placed an infantry division and an armoured brigade astride the Japanese main line of communications. Seldom has a move of this magnitude, which incidentally involved an opposed crossing of one of the great rivers of Asia, been carried out in complete secrecy.”¹²²

Conclusion

“The 1944-1945 campaign of Slim and his ‘Forgotten Army’ was the most remarkable feat of arms to take place under the British flag during the war. The transformation of the Indian Army that surrendered at Singapore and then staggered out of Burma into the victorious Fourteenth Army of 1944 and 1945 is even more dramatic.”¹²³

Commanders understand a military problem by developing a dialogue with subordinates, staffs and superiors, thus establishing context. By continually updating his understanding of both the enemy and the terrain enabled Slim to find the solution to the overly aggressive Japanese forces.¹²⁴ The Indian Army was initially weak in the jungle. Through meticulous training, the inventive use of airpower, and careful preparation of the ‘Admin Box’, Fourteenth Army ended as an extremely effective fighting force. Slim focused his respective staffs on the necessity for joint cooperation with Allied air forces. This created a shared understanding of the issues faced. Thus, when ground forces were under severe pressure, the air forces literally did everything possible to ensure a continual supply of support to the ground forces.¹²⁵ *Defeat into Victory* notes that air power was not a panacea; “We discovered, both when it was overwhelmingly against us and

¹²¹ B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy* (New York: Praeger Publishers, Inc., 1974.), 5-6. B.H. Liddell Hart offers in his book *Strategy* the application of the indirect approach, and is a strong advocate of it. Liddell Hart identifies the indirect approach by informing the reader that to follow, or attack natural lines of enemy strength merely increases their ability to resist. Liddell Hart’s experiences during WWI created a thought process that is explicit in the indirect approach. Successful application has different forms from turning maneuvers, an attack from the rear, or confusing the enemy as to the true friendly intentions.

¹²² S. Woodburn Kirby, “The War Against Japan IV,” *History of the Second World War* (London: H.M. Stationary Office, 1965), 429.

¹²³ Raymond Callahan, *Churchill and His Generals* (KS: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 188.

¹²⁴ U.S. Department of Defense, *Field Manual (FM) 5-0*, March 2011, Change No 1 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office), 1-4.

¹²⁵ Field Marshal Viscount William Slim, *Defeat Into Victory, Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942 – 1945* (UK: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 545.

equally when it was overwhelmingly with us, that it could not stop movement on the ground; it could only impede and delay it...One of the characteristics of air power is its ever-increasing flexibility, but even this has certain limitations.”¹²⁶ Moreover, he acknowledged the use of air transport as “a new kind of warfare...we were undoubtedly the most air-minded army that ever existed.”¹²⁷ Critical to the application and employment of force was the Burmese terrain. He realized, as did the Japanese, that few geographical areas truly denied access to the infantry. Thus, Slim used maneuver where most British commanders thought there was no trafficability, even for a man on foot. His belief that the monsoon should not cease operations also created space and time previously thought to be impossible.

Slim’s ability to visualize his endstate showed a clear and uncluttered thought process. By his own acknowledgement, he sketched out a rough map before arriving in Burma in 1942, thus creating a frame on which to further build his vision; the destruction of Japanese forces in the China-Burma-India theater.¹²⁸ His comprehension of strategic direction, his application of operational art, and the guidance he gave to his tactical commanders was in evidence throughout his tenure in command of Fourteenth Army. His use of the indirect approach offered success in a number of battles and operations from the Arakan, to Kohima-Imphal, and to his coup de grace at Meiktila and Mandalay.

Slim clearly described his intent; indeed it was the only part of a written order he wrote himself. Describing the plan to a staff can be a challenging part of the operations process. When delivered, it should be done so in such a fashion as to be easily understood and should include the

¹²⁶ Ibid., 543.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 544-545.

¹²⁸ U.S. Department of Defense, *Field Manual (FM) 5-0*. March 2011, Change No 1 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office), 1-4; Department of the Army, *Army Doctrine Publication 3-0: Unified Land Operations* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2011), 13.

mission and the commanders planning guidance.¹²⁹ Slim remained cognizant of regaining the initiative after the withdrawal from Burma. However, initial failures within the chain of command frustrated his attempts. Once allowed greater freedom by senior commanders, such as Mountbatten, he was able to plan and execute shaping operations and to design a campaign that played to Allied strengths and forced the Japanese into a correspondent position of weakness. His success in the second Arakan campaign, capitalizing on the new methodology of the ‘Admin Box’, and the failure of the Japanese to understand when to cease offensive operations, allowed Slim the option to defeat the Japanese for the first time in the war. The rapid employment of air power to maneuver operational reserves, judicious use of phasing and transition from the defense to the offense allowed for the defeat of the Japanese main thrust at Kohima-Imphal. The ensuing conditions were thus set for *Operations Capital* and *Extended Capital*.

Slim directed Fourteenth Army with a sense of purpose and clarity. He constantly refocused his staff and subordinate commanders at critical junctures or decisive points. He thus ensured they were correctly resourced, prepared to exploit weakness, and knew what acceptable levels of risk were. Understanding respective strengths and weaknesses of his subordinates allowed him to lead and direct specific commanders and units to locations on the battlefield where their impact would be most keenly felt.¹³⁰ “I think it was that sense of being close to us, (not for nothing was he known as “Uncle Bill”) that was his greatest gift. You knew, when he talked of smashing Jap, that to him it meant not only arrows on a map but clearing bunkers and going in under shell-fire; that he had the head of general with the heart of a private soldier...He thought, he knew, at our level; it was that, and the sheer certainty that was built into every line of him, that gave Fourteenth Army its overwhelming confidence. And afterwards, when it was over

¹²⁹ Department of the Army, *Army Doctrine Publication 3-0: Unified Land Operations* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2011), 13.

¹³⁰ U.S. Department of Defense, *Field Manual (FM) 5-0*. March 2011, Change No 1 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office), 1-4.

and he spoke of what his army had done, it was always “you”, not even “we”, and never “I”.¹³¹ This quote defines Slims’ affinity with his soldiers. Indeed, it captures the essence of senior military leadership. He knew instinctively how to guide and mentor his subordinates, when to offer praise and how much, and most importantly, that he knew and cared for his men. Slim’s steadiness in command throughout the retreat, and the eventual retaking of Burma echoes of Clausewitz; “So long as a unit fights cheerfully, with spirit and élan, great strength of will is rarely needed; but once conditions become difficult, as they must when much is at stake, things no longer run like a well-oiled machine. The machine itself begins to resist, and the commander needs tremendous will-power to overcome this resistance.”¹³² Slim reversed a defeated army and turned it into the well-oiled and cheerful fighting unit. However, at times, he questioned his own abilities. “In a dark hour, he will turn in upon himself and question the very foundations of his leadership and manhood. And then he must stop! For, if he is ever to command in battle again, he must shake off these regrets, and stamp on them, as they claw at his will and self-confidence. He must beat off these attacks he delivers against himself, and cast out the doubts born of failure. Forget them, and remember only the lessons to be learnt from defeat – they are more than from victory.”¹³³ One of his most trusted subordinates wrote that Slim “‘...was wonderful to serve under,’ recalled Frank Messervy. Having ‘discussed the thing with you he would make some suggestions. He would then leave it to you. Just give you encouragement.’”¹³⁴

“Leadership is the process of influencing people by providing purpose, direction, and

¹³¹ George MacDonald Fraser, *Quartered Safe Out Here: A Harrowing Tale of World War II* (NY: Skyhorse Publishing, Inc., 2007), 37.

¹³² Michael Howard, and Peter Paret, ed. and trans., Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 104.

¹³³ Field Marshal Viscount William Slim, *Defeat Into Victory, Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942 – 1945* (UK: Cooper Square Press, 2000), ix.

¹³⁴ Robert Lyman, *Slim, Master of War: Burma and the Birth of Modern Warfare* (UK: Constable & Robinson Ltd, 2004), 241.

motivation, while operating to accomplish the mission and improving the organization.”¹³⁵ This quote neatly encapsulates the bulk of the actions Slim took throughout 1942-1945 with regards to leadership. Moreover, the British Army continues to train its officers on a diet of Slim at the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst.¹³⁶ His capacity for leadership and the responsibility that goes with it is noted by his official biographer, Ronald Lewin. Writing in 1959 to his old friend Brigadier Roberts, Slim wrote of *Operation Extended Capital*. ““This I considered to be something I should do myself without asking for approval, so I did not ask for sanction.”” Lewin comments on this point. “No doubt this behaviour was high-handed and reprehensible. Still, what Slim had in fact done was to initiate at short notice the most subtle, audacious and complex operation in his whole career.”¹³⁷ Although some would argue he deliberately went beyond his remit of command, it is an immutable fact that when the moment demanded it, he shouldered the burden of responsibility.¹³⁸ This point illustrates that Slim was simply working within the bounds of mission command. He knew Mountbatten’s intent, and with a single-minded focus, moved forward. His ability to generate morale and courage in individuals and units was the very basis of his capacity as a commander. Understanding multiple languages and possessing of a genial affinity for the men under his command meant that they fought for him, even during times of

¹³⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, *Field Manual (FM) 5-0*. March 2011, Change No 1 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office), 1-4.

¹³⁶ Field Marshal Viscount William Slim, *Address to the Australian Institute of Management 4 April 1957*. <http://www.mkbartlett.co.uk/data/further/0311MOIFR01.pdf> (accessed December 29, 2011). *Serve To Lead* is a book issued to all officer cadets on arrival at Sandhurst. In it, Slim is quoted thus “We in the army do not talk of “management”, but of “leadership.” This is significant. There is a difference between leadership and management. The leader and the men who follow him represent one of the oldest, most natural and most effective of all human relationships. The manager and those he manages are a later product, with neither so romantic nor so inspiring a history. Leadership is of the spirit, compounded of personality and vision: its practice is an art. Management is of the mind, more a matter of accurate calculation, of statistics, of methods, timetables; its practice is a science. Managers are necessary; leaders are essential.”

¹³⁷ Ronald Lewin, *Slim, The Standard Bearer* (GB: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1999), 210.

¹³⁸ U.S. Department of Defense, *Field Manual (FM) 5-0*. March 2011, Change No 1 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office), 1-5.

incredible hardship, such as the retreat in 1942. To be seen by one's soldiers was essential, even if that meant exposing himself to dangers not usually faced by an army commander. "For Slim this meant penetrating on foot into the heat of the battle, where one of Cowan's brigades was assaulting the northern outskirts of Meiktila. Here he and his party watched a tank-and-infantry clearance of Japanese bunkers only a few hundred yards away."¹³⁹ Morale of the force is critical; Slim implied that there are always lessons to be learned both internally and from the enemy.¹⁴⁰ Even a force that has been repeatedly defeated is still capable of being ultimately victorious. "The use of new weapons and technical devices can be quickly taught; to develop hardihood, initiative, mutual confidence, and stark leadership takes longer."¹⁴¹ Creating the fighting spirit within Fourteenth Army was crucial, but equally so was the sense of unity and comradeship that came with being truly joint, Slim fought the battle as a team. "Ours was a joint land and air war; its result, as much a victory for the air forces as for the army."¹⁴²

Slim's continual assessment of the Japanese after the breakout from Kohima-Imphal is indicative of a flexible, determined, and agile commander.¹⁴³ Whilst advancing towards the Irrawaddy River he re framed the operational environment, identifying that the problem of destroying the Japanese on the Shwebo plain had become an irrelevance if Fourteenth Army could unlock the remainder of Burma without becoming decisively engaged in a battle of attrition on unfavorable terms. With the instituting of *Operation Extended Capital*, he showed his

¹³⁹ Ibid., 225. Also see Slim's own description of the battle from his perspective watching a Gurkha platoon with a Sherman tank defeat a heavily dug in Japanese position. Field Marshal Viscount William Slim, *Defeat Into Victory, Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942 – 1945* (UK: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 448-450.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 536-538. Slim notes that the Japanese quickly gained the upper hand in the early days in Burma. It took nearly two years to regain that sense of morale in 14th Army.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 550.

¹⁴² Ibid., 546.

¹⁴³ U.S. Department of Defense, *Field Manual (FM) 5-0* March 2011, Change No 1 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office), 1-5.

genius.¹⁴⁴

During 1944-45, Fourteenth Army used both direct and indirect methods of operational maneuver. Slim's use of Chindit columns, a special force of sorts, allowed the unorthodox Wingate within the context of sufficient air power, operational reach that certainly supported Fourteenth Army, but not decisively so. Indeed, air power not only for the Chindit columns, but also for Fourteenth Army further increased its operational reach, thus creating simultaneity and generating tempo. Japanese planning made the false and ultimately fatal assumption that Slim would not have the ability to reinforce both the Arakan and Kohima-Imphal fronts due to the extended ground lines of communication. Indeed, the near simultaneous actions in the Arakan, and Kohima-Imphal during *Operations Ha-Go* and *U-Go* unbalanced the Japanese and ensured that they were unable to secure the logistic bases built by the Indian Army in preparation for future offensives. These examples highlight Slim's understanding of when to transition to the offensive, having correctly identified Japanese culmination points.

Slim's ability to combine a multinational force, initially devoid of capacity, confidence, and fighting spirit is an achievement of monumental proportions. Throughout his career he proved that critical thinking, an incisive intellect, a refusal to admit defeat, and a passion for the soldiers under his command created a bond of fierce loyalty so important in fighting and sustaining an army challenged by so many issues, not least of which stemmed from its status as a secondary theater to Europe. From his time at Gallipoli, to clearing Burma of Imperial Japanese forces, Slim always gained his soldiers trust and respect, traits that do not come easily. From his arrival in Burma in 1942 to the end of World War II, Slim showed a masterful application of

¹⁴⁴ Michael Howard, and Peter Paret, ed. and trans., Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), 100. Clausewitz describes genius thus "Any complex activity, if it is to be carried on with any degree of virtuosity, calls for appropriate gifts of intellect and temperament. If they are outstanding and reveal themselves in exceptional achievements, their possessor is called a "genius"...we may be allowed to use the word in its ordinary meaning, in which "genius" refers to a very highly developed mental aptitude for a particular occupation."

mission command. He proved beyond doubt that he understood the operational problems he faced, visualized clearly how to link complex and conflicting strategic requirements with his tactical means, and, through the application of the classic principles of operational art, showed his credentials as one of the outstanding operational artists of the time.¹⁴⁵ His battles, especially the latter campaigns of 1944-1945, show that Slim's relevance is enduring. Moreover, he is instructive to future proponents of operational art. His use of deception, operational tempo, and the indirect approach are sublime examples of how to defeat an enemy in the most trying of physical and mental circumstances.¹⁴⁶

Slim adhered to a never codified principal of war given to him by his Regimental Sergeant Major when he was a young and impressionable officer cadet prior to World War I; "There's only one principle of war and that's this. Hit the other fellow, as quick as you can, and as hard as you can, where it hurts him the most, when he ain't lookin'!"¹⁴⁷ In the instance of the Japanese in Burma in World War II, overstretch, hubris, an honor code, and a desire to succeed in the face of conflicting evidence whatever the human and material cost, enabled Slim to conduct an estimate that correctly identified his intentions and therefore plan successfully for the Japanese defeat. Slim understood risk. By creating opportunities to strike the enemy when overstretched gave the Indian Army the opportunity to conduct successful offensive actions. Field Marshal Viscount Wavell noted that, "...while coolness in disaster is the supreme proof of a commander's courage, energy in pursuit is the surest test of his strength of will."¹⁴⁸ By the end of World War II,

¹⁴⁵ Department of the Army, *Army Doctrine Publication 3-0: Unified Land Operations* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2011), 13.

¹⁴⁶ U.S. Department of Defense, *Field Manual (FM) 3-0* February 2008, Change No. 1 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office), Ch. 7.

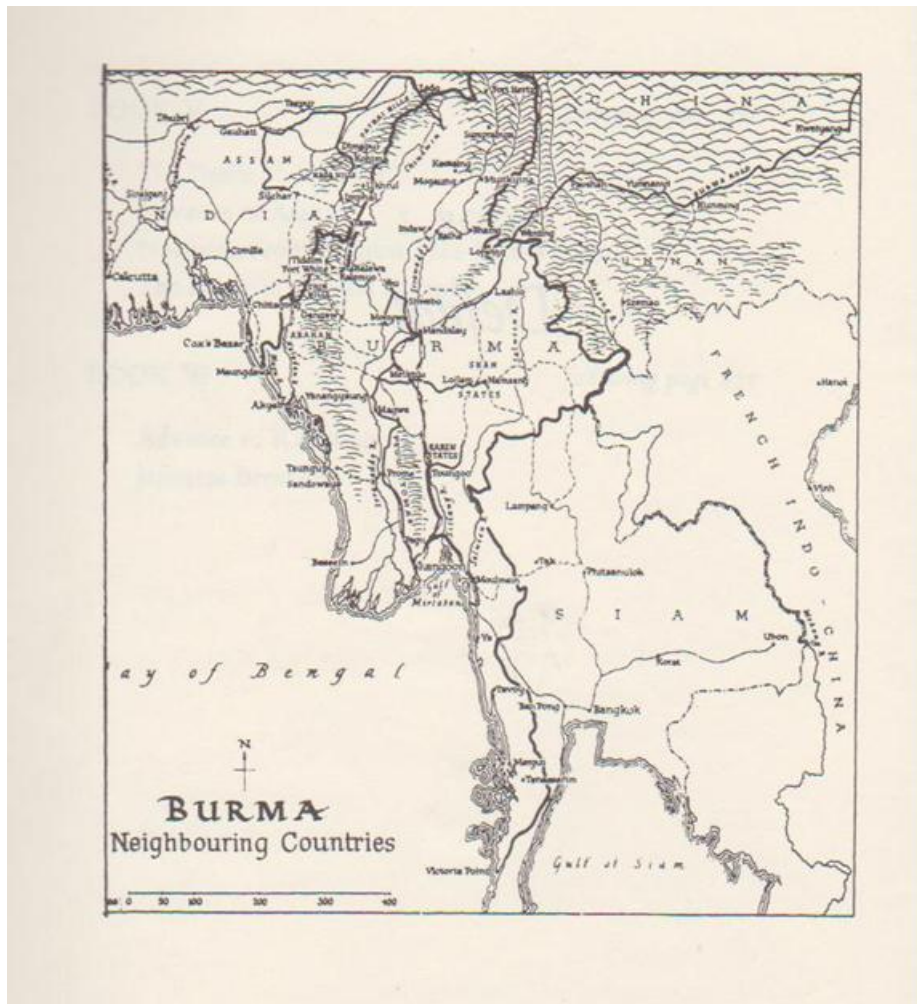
¹⁴⁷ Field Marshal Viscount William Slim, *Defeat Into Victory, Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942 – 1945* (UK: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 551.

¹⁴⁸ S. Woodburn Kirby, "The War Against Japan IV," *History of the Second World War* (London: H.M. Stationary Office, 1965), 1.

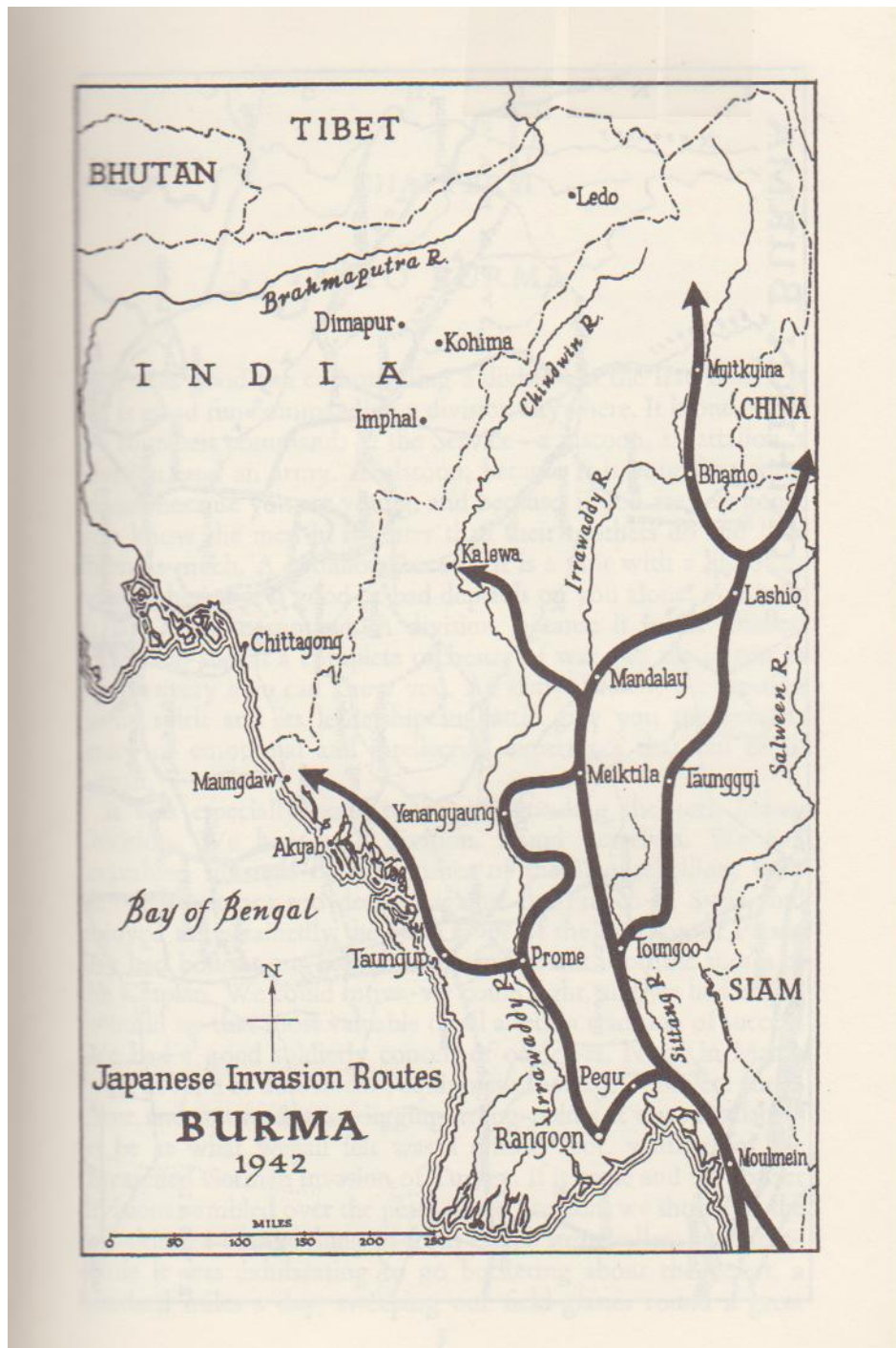
Slim had been tested in both, and found to be lacking in neither.

Illustrations

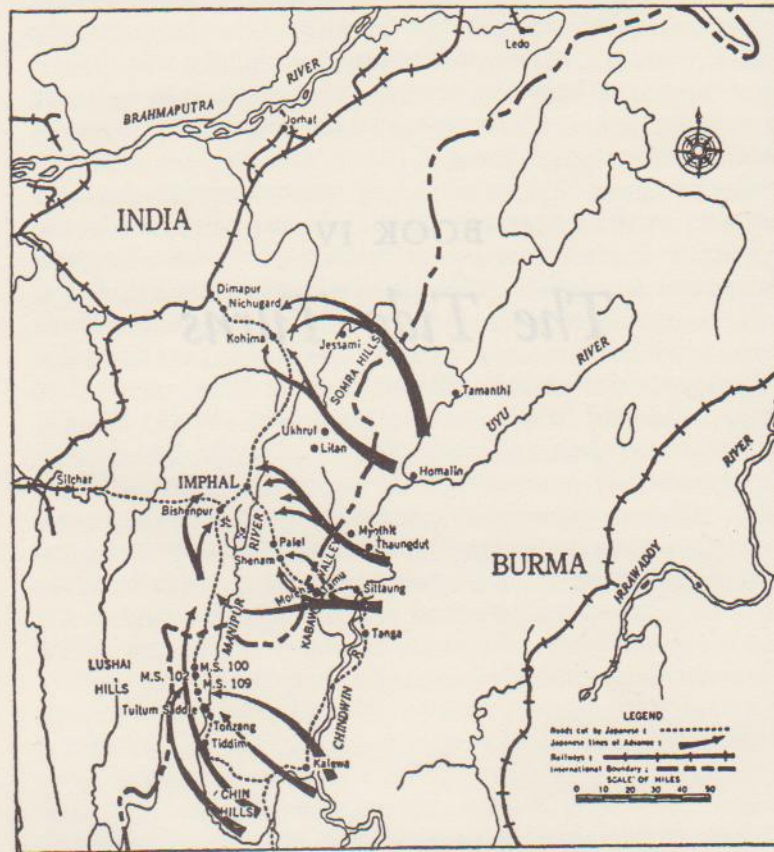
(Field Marshal Viscount William Slim, "Burma – Neighbouring Countries," *Defeat Into Victory, Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942 – 1945* [UK: Cooper Square Press, 2000], 1). Copyright approved.



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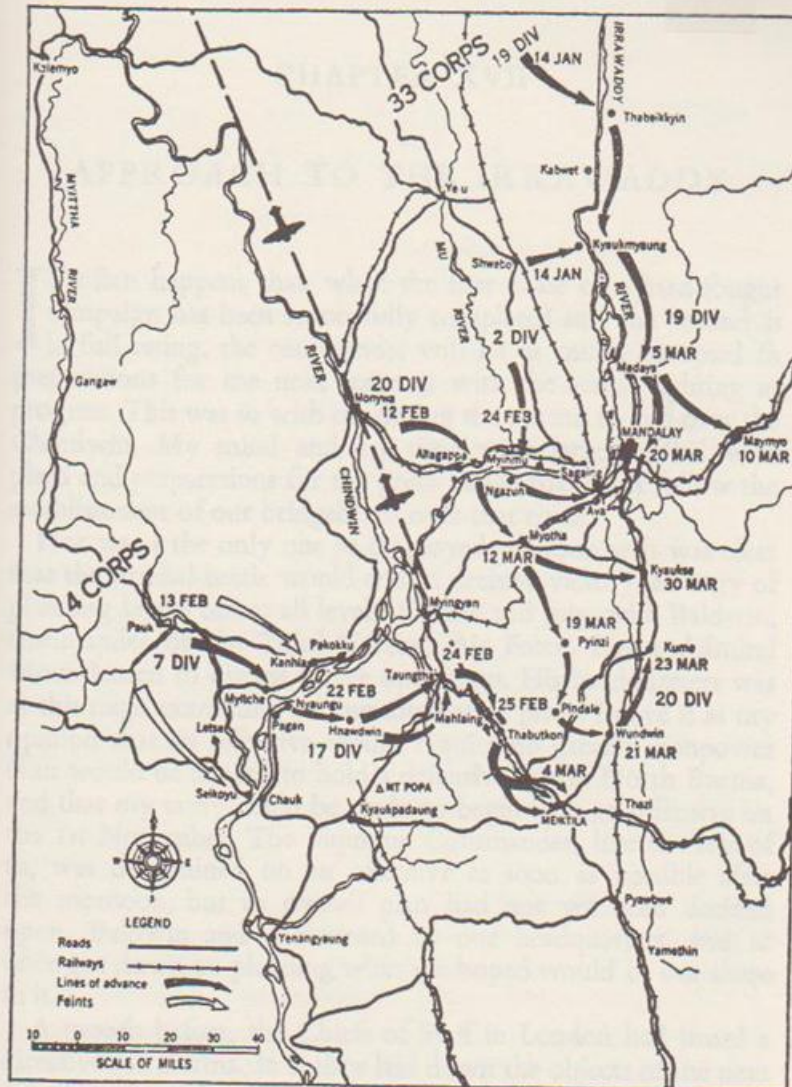


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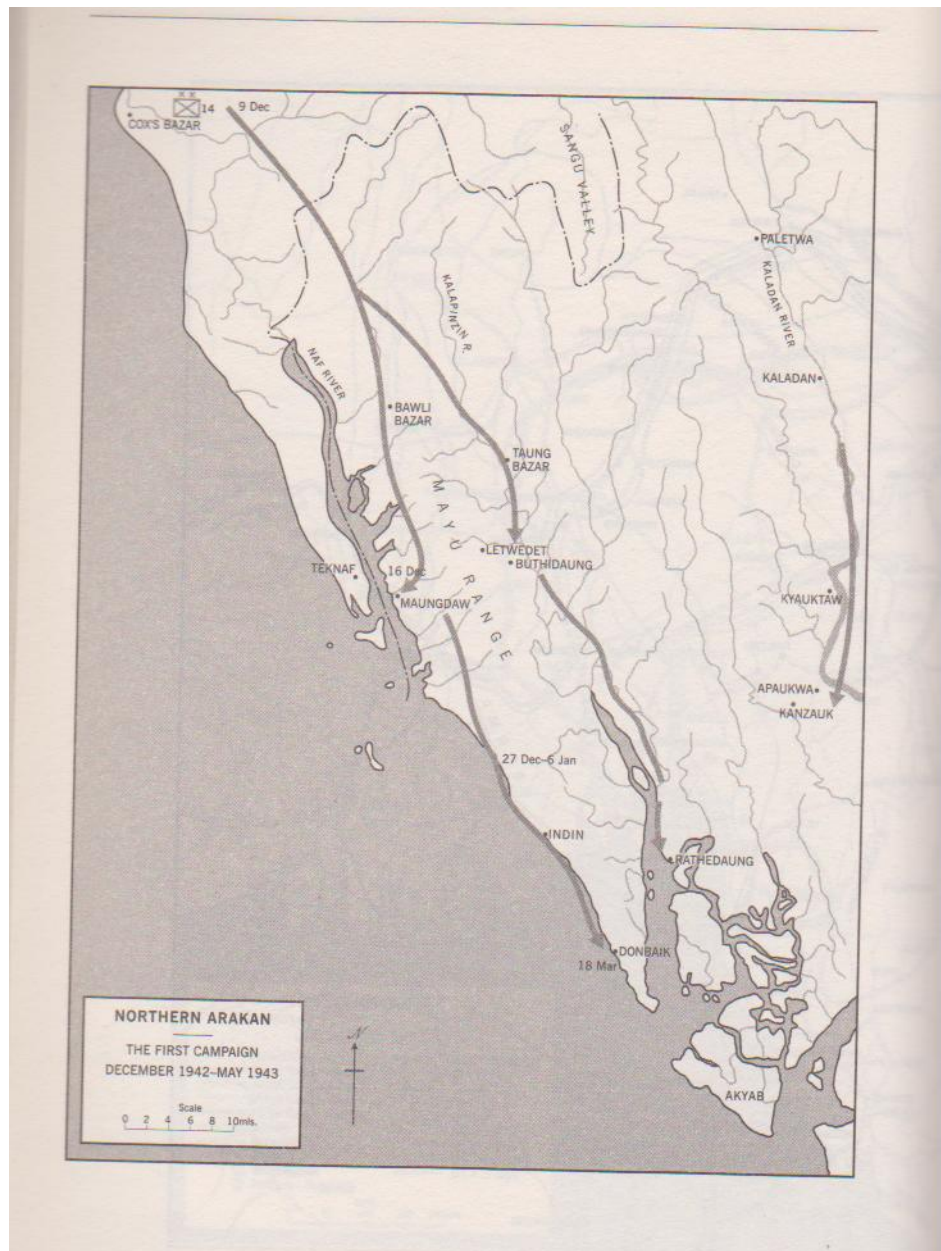
JAPANESE INVASION ROUTES, BURMA 1944

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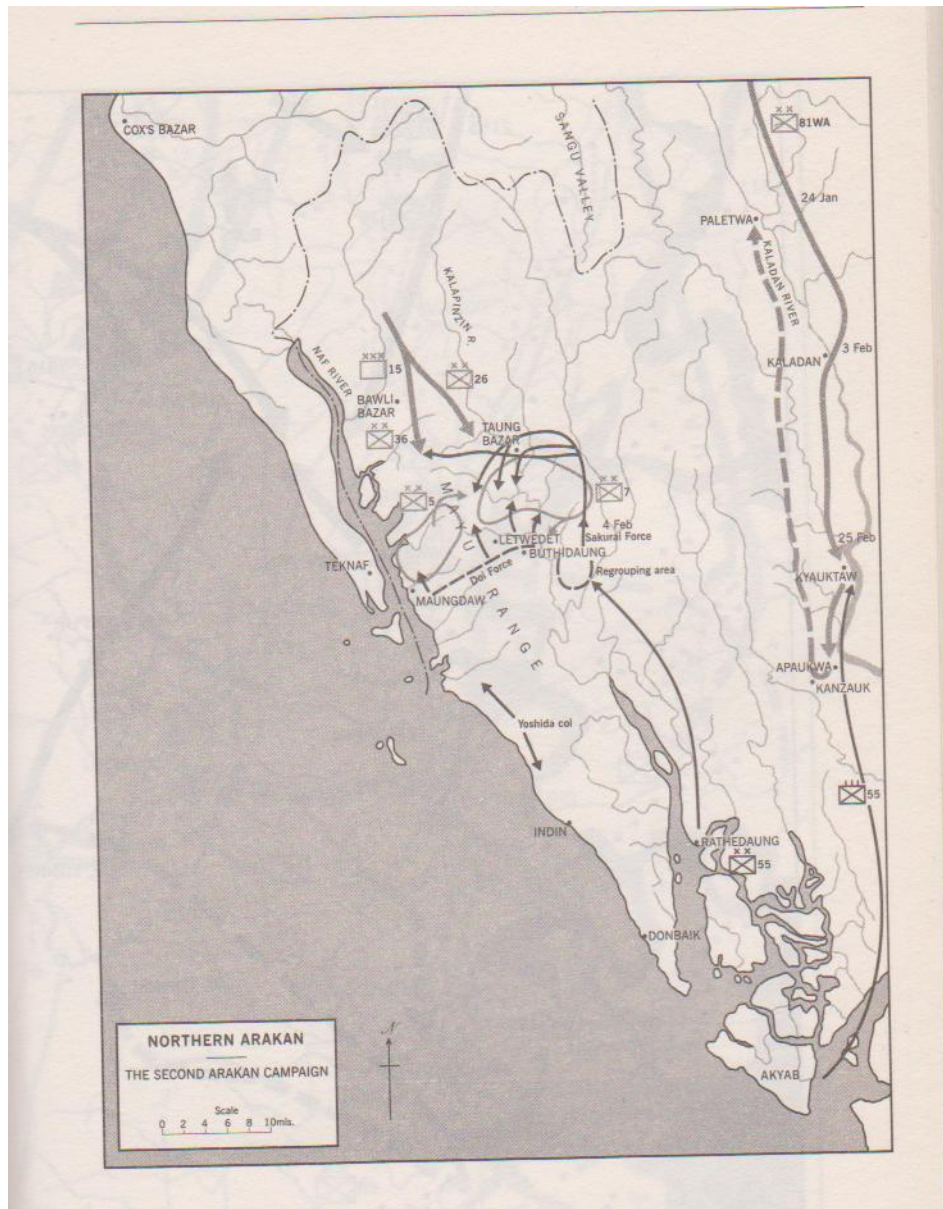


THE BATTLE OF CENTRAL BURMA

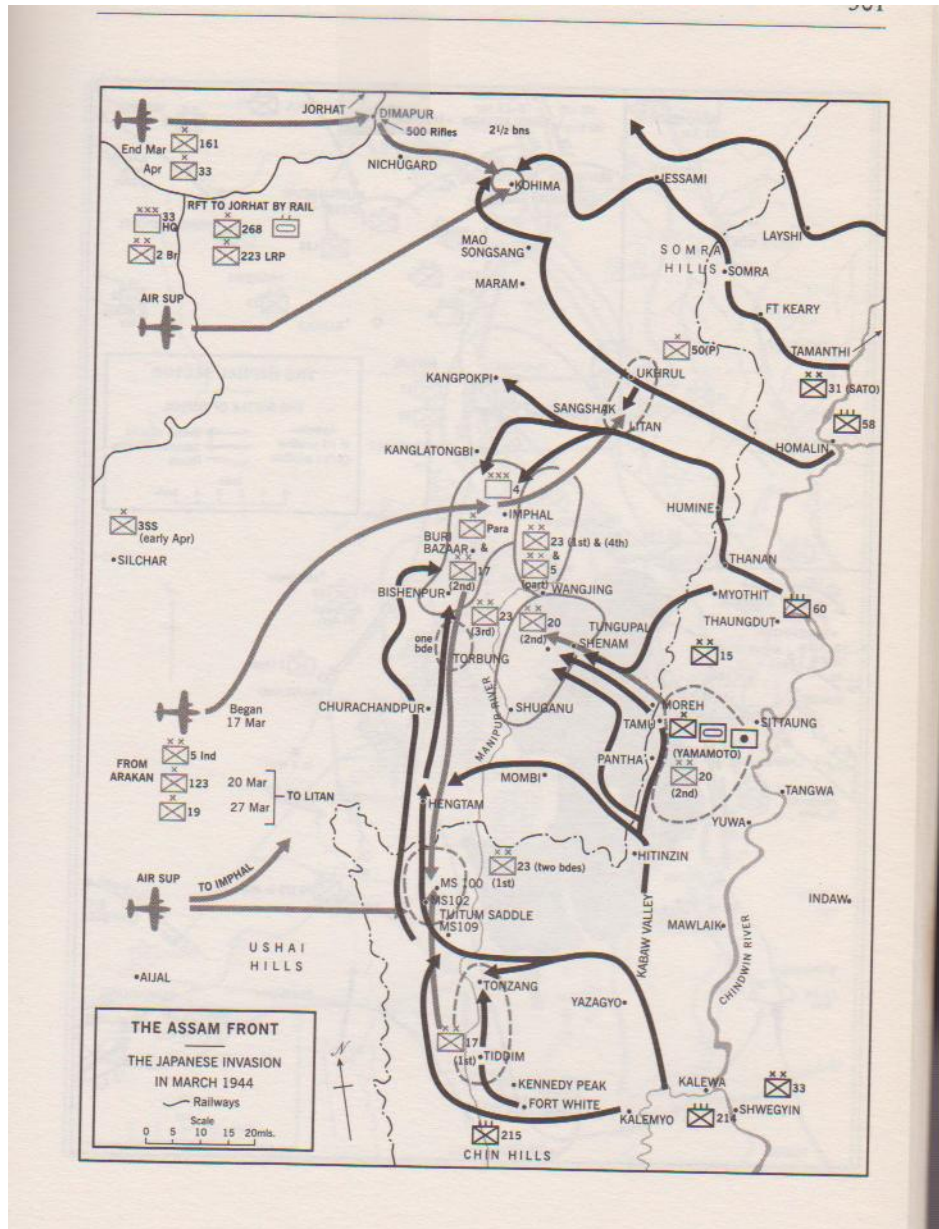
Robert Lyman, "Northern Arakan First Campaign," *Slim, Master of War: Burma and the Birth of Modern Warfare* (UK: Constable & Robinson Ltd, 2004), 296. Copyright approved.



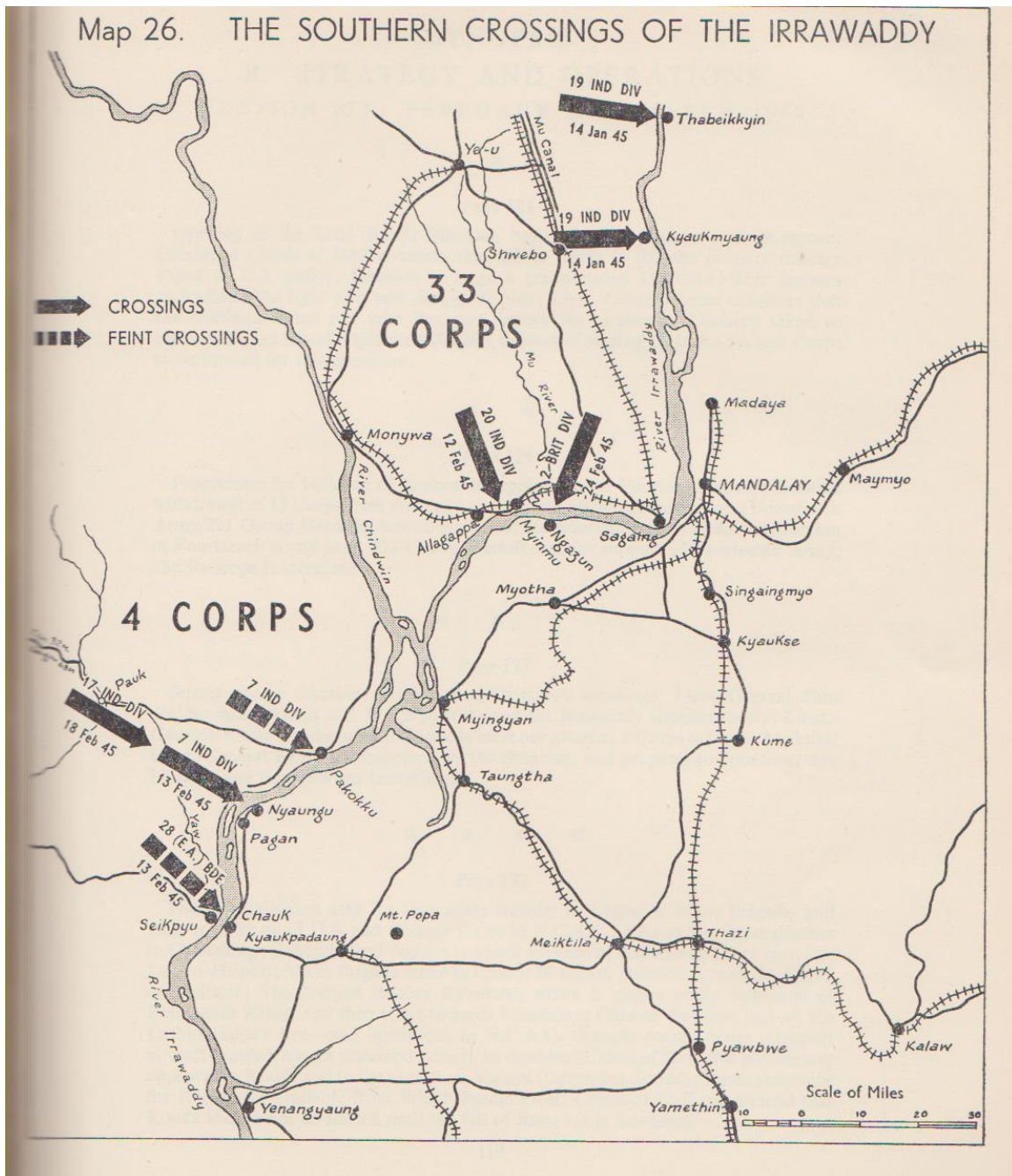
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Vice-Admiral The Earl Mountbatten of Burma Mountbatten, "Map 26: The Southern Crossings of the Irrawaddy," *Report to the Combined Chiefs of Staff by the Supreme Allied Commander South-East Asia* 1943 – 1945 (London: H.M. Stationary Office, 1951), 117. Copyright approved.



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